NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, *238 William St., N. Y.*

No. 339. **Price, Five Cents.**

NICK CARTER AND THE LIVING MASK

OR MURDERED WITHOUT A MARK

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

WHISH! THE STEEL BLADE CUT THROUGH THE AIR, BUT WITH ONE HAND NICK CAUGHT THE DESCENDING WRIST, AND WITH THE OTHER PLANTED A TERRIFIC BLOW ON THE RUFFIAN'S THROAT.

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NICK CARTER AND THE LIVING MASK;

OR,

Murdered Without a Mark.

By the author of "NICHOLAS CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

A STARTLING COINCIDENCE.

"Gentleman to see you, Mr. Carter."

Nick Carter whirled around in his chair and took the card which the office boy presented to him.

On the card was inscribed:

HENRY STARK,
Confidential Agent,
London, England.

"Show him in."

A moment or two later a man of middle age and fine appearance, entered the office.

"Mr. Carter?"

"Yes, Mr. Stark. Sit down. What can I do for you?"

"I have a most remarkable tale to tell," began Stark, addressing himself to the attentive detective. "Here it is in brief:

"I am a confidential agent of the British Government.

"My mission here is to find a man who, it is fully believed, has committed no less than three mysterious murders, the victim in each instance being found murdered without a mark!"

"Strange!" muttered Nick Carter.

"Strange, but true. Here is what is known:

"Sir Guy Wallingford was a wealthy baronet, owning a handsome and valuable country seat in one of the middle countries of England, a town house in London, and some mines in Cornwall.

"His wealth, therefore could hardly be computed. However, he was credited with having no less than a million sterling, in hard cash.

"Sir Guy was a widower. His family consisted of himself, his brother, and his son and heir.

"There was also another person who spent about one-third of his time with the baronet, and the other two-thirds at college. This was Mordaunt Clare, an orphan cousin, who had grown up to manhood with Sir Guy's heir, and was treated as well as young Guy in every particular.

"One morning Sir Guy Wallingford was found dead in his bed.

"His room was orderly, nothing had been taken away, the face of the dead man was peaceful, and it was generally supposed that he had died from some heart complaint.

"His family physician protested that Sir Guy's heart was in the most perfect order. Nevertheless, no other theory was acceptable, and in the absence of any mark denoting violence, it was conceded that the worthy gentleman had died a natural death.

"The brother, the son, and the cousin, all of whom were inmates of the house at the time, were prostrated with grief.

"Three months later Sir Guy's brother was found dead

in his large comfortable easy-chair. A book at his side showed that he had been reading. When found he was thought to be asleep, and it was some time ere the servants realized that he was dead.

"There was no mark of violence, nor any contraction to show sudden and spasmodic pain. A disease of the heart was again mentioned in explanation, and the dead man was buried.

"Young Sir Guy, quite melancholy with grief, kept his cousin, Mordaunt Clair, at home with him constantly.

"A month later, and the young baronet, like his father and uncle, was found dead, lying peacefully in his bed, and seemingly asleep.

" 'Disease of the heart' was the only explanation of the medical experts who were called in. The family doctor shook his head, but he could only protest that the young man's heart had been sound and unaffected.

"Well, the third unfortunate member of that ill-fated family was placed in the tomb.

"Mordaunt Clare was discovered to be the sole living relative, and therefore succeeded to the vast riches.

"This young man astonished everybody by his odd actions.

"He sold the town and country houses, drew all his cash from the banks, and departed for parts unknown.

"Then the old family doctor became suspicious of him.

" 'That man is a murderer, and he is flying from the scene of his crimes,' he said. 'Those three men were positively murdered, although the assassin left no mark.'

"He made inquiries, and found that at college Clare had studied medicine, and was considered an expert student in anatomy.

"Pursuing his inquiries, he found that Clare had leased his interest in the mines, had left no agent behind him, had departed mysteriously, and gone, no one knew where.

"Then the old doctor acted.

"He went before high authorities, laid the facts before them, showed them that Clare had cut himself off from the world that knew him, and, in short, easily convinced them that he had, in some manner, removed the three men who had barred his way to the possession of a princely fortune.

"They agreed with him, and he then awakened their active interest by the statement that inasmuch as Mordaunt Clare was the last of the Wallingford race, if he was captured, tried and convicted, the enormous property would revert to the crown.

"That settled it.

"The matter was at once put into my hands, as a confidential agent, and here I am with all Britain's wealth at my back, if need be, to aid me in tracking down Mordaunt Clare, who, according to the Scotland Yard detectives, positively embarked for this city. If he can be found we may spring a trap on him, and in his first hour of terror he may confess all, as thousands of great criminals have done. That he really did commit the murders——"

"Hush!" interrupted Nick, and at that instant the telegraph began its rapid clicking on the desk.

Nick wrote what the electric current communicated, and there was a strange expression on his face as he turned to Stark and read aloud from the paper:

"At nine o'clock this morning Charles Deems was found dead in his bed at his residence, —— Street. He is said to be murdered, but without a mark."

The two men looked at one another with wondering glances.

"Murdered without a mark. This is strange," said Nick Carter.

"It is more than strange," observed the confidential agent. "It seems to me that the hand of fate is in this matter. Can it be that the man I seek, Mordaunt Clare, committed this crime?"

"We must not let our excited feelings run away with our judgment, nor lead us to jump at strange conclusions," said Nick Carter. "However, it is certainly remarkable that a murder of this kind should be reported just as you finished telling about three such crimes."

Stark now drew forth a few letters, and a card-size photograph.

"Here are some letters," he said, "of no special value, I think, except in so far as they give us excellent specimens of Clare's handwriting.

"This photograph, taken by a London artist, is said to be an excellent likeness of the man we seek."

He placed the photograph in Nick's hands.

The detective examined it closely.

It was a face that, once seen, could not be forgotten.

The features were all strongly marked, pronounced in their style.

The nose was high, and very thin, and so prominent that it seemed to make the chin recede.

The upper lip projected.

The under lip receded.

This added to the retiring effect of the chin.

The well-defined eyebrows were prettily arched.

"I would know that face among a thousand," positively asserted the detective.

"So I say," returned Stark. "That high nose, sharp as a knife, that projecting lip, the receding chin, and the beautifully arched eyebrows would enable me to pick him out anywhere."

"Is he tall or short?"

"Tall."

"His age?"

"About twenty-five."

"Fond of society?"

"He lives for pleasure."

"Then we'll find him."

"Why so?"

"Because his wealth and his tastes will place him among the upper ten, and there we shall have no difficulty in tracing him out."

Little did Nick Carter dream of the immense difficulties that would be thrown in his path.

Accompanied by Stark, the great detevtive went uptown, and proceeded straight to the captain of the precinct.

"I have called in regard to that affair in —— Street, captain," said Nick. "Your dispatch excited our curiosity. You stated, in that, that the man had no mark upon him to indicate a violent death, and yet was believed to have been murdered."

"So I did."

"What led to the belief?"

"I will tell you:

"Charles Deems was a handsome young man of good family.

"He was wealthy and agreeable, and a favorite with all.

"He was a person of good habits, and healthy and strong. He went to bed at a reasonable hour last night in perfect health.

"This morning he was found dead in his bed at about nine.

"While the greatest confusion prevailed in the house, a moaning sound was heard.

"The servants located it, and found that it came from the library, which was situated on the same floor as the bedroom of the dead man.

"The door was locked.

"It was burst open, and there they found one of the servant girls, bound hand and foot, and most painfully gagged.

"She was released, given a drink, and placed in a chair.

"There she told her brief story:

"She had come out of a room, and just caught sight of a man when he turned upon her and struck her down.

"She knew no more, and could say no more.

"She had come out from a light room, and the hallway was quite dark, therefore she could not see the man's face.

"Investigations by my detective led to ascertaining the fact that the dead man's room had been entered by means of a skeleton key, which was still in the lock.

"These facts led all to suspect that the young man had been murdered, although a careful examination by a doctor failed to discover a sign of violence. I suggested a disease of the heart, but the doctor assured me that he had examined the young man a few days ago and found him in perfect condition, heart and all.

"So, mysterious as the case is, we are bound to believe that Charles Deems was murdered."

"It seems like it," assented Nick.

He turned short upon his heel.

"Come," he said to Stark, "and we will view the body."

Together they left the police station, and proceeded to the house of the dead man.

A considerable number of people were in the elegant mansion.

Nick Carter had no difficulty in finding the room where the dead body of Charles Deems lay.

The policeman at the door knew him, and respectfully moved aside to let him pass.

With Stark at his side the experienced detective entered the room.

One step from the threshold he paused, and his keen eyes swept every part of the bedroom. Every object was noted in that one rapid survey. Nothing, however, of a suspicious nature met his gaze.

Stark eagerly pressed forward to the side of the bed.

Charles Deems had been a handsome young man, and looked attractive even in death.

One would have guessed that he was sleeping, if unacquainted with the truth.

"The same placid countenance, the same flexibility of limb, the same lack of anything that could denote either violence or pain."

Nick Carter heard the words.

"He looks the same as the three dead men in England looked?" the detective inquiringly said.

"Yes."

"You have an idea in your mind."

"I admit it. I cannot rid myself of the impression that those men in England and this one in New York were murdered, and all by the same man."

At this moment an altercation was heard in the hallway outside.

The moment one of the voices was heard, Mr. Stark looked up with something of a start.

He grasped Nick's arm rather nervously, and listened intently:

"You can't pass, sir."

"But I must!"

"Against orders, sir."

"Confound your orders. Here is my best friend found dead in his bed, reported to have been murdered, and you tell me I can't see him. Why, we were like brothers."

"I can't help that."

"But you shall help it. You'll have to kill me to prevent me going to the side of my dead friend."

"You'll have to get a permit."

"Officer, I'm half crazy with grief. If you bar my path I may half kill you."

Stark shot a swift whisper into the detective's ear:

"I recognize a familiar sound in that voice."

"Then I'll let him in."

"Do."

Nick Carter crossed the room, threw open the door, and glanced at the man to whom the officer was speaking.

His heart gave a great bound. The photograph he had gazed at within the hour came up before him.

Did Mordaunt Clare stand there?

CHAPTER II.

MORE AND MORE PUZZLING.

Certainly the excited party who had been denied admission to the room by the officer did strongly resemble Mordaunt Clare.

The resemblance, however, was one that was more strong and striking at the first glance than afterward. The more you gazed the more doubtful you would become.

When looking at the photograph, the detective had said to himself:

"That high sharp nose as thin as a knife, that projecting upper lip, the receding chin, and the delicately-arched eyebrows would enable me to pick Mordaunt Clare out in any congregation of people, even if somewhat disguised."

Remembering these points, Nick felt that he could not be looking at Mordaunt Clare now.

The person who stood before him, and who had so agitated him, was exactly the opposite of Mordaunt Clare in all the decided features of the face seen in the photograph.

His nose was flat.

His eyebrows ran quite straight out from the top of his nose, and then turned upward about a quarter of an inch, giving a queer expression to his eyes.

His upper lip receded.

His chin projected.

"By Jove," muttered Nick, "he is in all these facial characteristics the exact opposite of Mordaunt Clare, and he cannot possibly be the man Stark is in search of, yet he certainly looks like him."

The stranger looked up and saw the detective.

"Have you charge of the case?"

"I have," admitted Nick Carter.

"Will you permit me to gaze upon the dead body of my dear friend?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Percy Lang, and poor Charlie and I were like brothers with one another."

"You can come in."

He stepped aside, permitting Lang to pass.

The latter entered the room.

As he passed Nick, the detective was enabled to take a glance at him side face.

"What a remarkable resemblance to Mordaunt Clare," he muttered. "Even the lines of his head are exactly the same. But pshaw! it is impossible that he can be the man."

Straight to the bed went Percy Lang and gazed down sorrowfully upon the face of the dead.

Nick glanced at Stark.

The confidential agent was grasping the back of a chair for support.

He was regarding Lang with an expression of utter bewilderment.

"He is puzzled," thought Nick, and glided to his side.

He addressed him in a whisper:

"He resembles Clare?"

"Yes."

"Is it he?"

"No, it cannot be, now that I look well at him, and yet I was upon the point of denouncing him when he first entered the room."

"You can see, as I did, that in some respects he is the exact opposite of our man."

"True, and yet——"

"Oh! come, there can be no 'yets' in the matter. If a man's eyebrows are arched downward, they don't run out straight from his nose and twist upward; if his nose be thin and sharp, it can't be thick and flat, and if his chin recedes it can't project. The resemblance was startling, but there it ends."

"You must be right," assented Stark. "White cannot be black, and so this young man cannot be Mordaunt Clare."

Percy Lang was wiping his eyes with his delicate handkerchief when the detective approached him.

"You were an intimate friend of the deceased, Mr. Lang?"

"We were like brothers."

"You were in his confidence?"

"Completely."

"You knew all about him?"

"Everything."

"Do you know if he had any enemy or enemies?"

"I don't think poor Charlie had a foe in the wide world."

"You know of no quarrel existing between him and anybody else?"

"I am sure no such matter had any existence. Oh, Mr.——"

"Carter."

"Mr. Carter, if you will hunt down his murderer, I promise you, on my own account, as handsome a sum of money as ever was paid to any of your men for the detection of any criminal. I am rich, very rich; this man was my best friend, and I would pour the blood out of my heart to avenge his death."

"I shall certainly do my best," said Nick.

So saying, he motioned to Stark to leave the room.

Downstairs, Nick had brief interviews with young Deems' father, and the girl who had been found tied in the room of the murdered man, but nothing of importance was elicited. Mr. Deems, however, said that his son had first met Percy Lang about six months before, and since then they had been inseparable.

With Stark at his side the detective left the house.

"Isn't it remarkable that this Percy Lang should have turned up here in New York just exactly as we might have expected our man to do?" the confidential agent asked.

"Yes, it struck me at once, and then the fact that he is the only party at present indicated in this 'murder without a mark,' makes it stranger still. But he can't be the man, in spite of the great resemblance to Mordaunt Clare."

"Certainly not," said Stark, drawing forth the photograph he had brought from England. "Look at this face."

"It's already stamped on my memory," said Nick Carter. "Well, we know that wax fingers, ears, and noses, and false eyes, also, are now possible to art, but not such a change as this would be for Clare."

"Oh, impossible," returned Stark. "Still," he added, "before I saw Lang, I could have sworn that I heard Mordaunt Clare talking with the officer on guard in the hall."

They were walking briskly along the street while speaking.

The bright sun was shining down upon the neat side streets through which they were passing.

Here and there groups of children were playing.

It was a peaceful locality, and the scene was peaceful, too.

Its character was suddenly changed. A carriage came rolling along the road.

It passed by Nick Carter and his friend, and came to a standstill a short distance ahead of them.

Just as our two friends were in the act of passing by the coach the door was thrown open.

Three men leaped out.

In the broad, open light of day, with crowded main thoroughfares but half a block distant on either side, these three men made a murderous assault upon Nick Carter and Stark.

Their weapons were silent but deadly.

Each man grasped a long-bladed knife as he rushed forward to the attack.

In most cases the assault would have been successful.

Nick Carter, however, was a man who was never off his guard.

Even in a ball-room he would have been on the lookout for danger.

He caught the flash of the knives in the bright beams of the sun, as the three men leaped from the coach.

At such a moment thought and action became a unit with Nick Carter.

He reached forth his hand, grasped Stark by the shoulder, and dragged him along as he made a backward movement.

This brought them both against the iron railing in front of a house.

"On guard," cried Nick.

There was no time to draw a weapon of defense.

The assassins were upon them.

Two of them rushed at Nick.

The third one made for Stark, and stabbed viciously at him, aiming at his breast.

With a steady hand, a clear eye, and an undaunted front, the confidential agent faced his foe, threw up his hands in boxing style, blocked the thrust with his left arm, and struck out vigorously with his right.

The sleeve of his coat and also that of his shirt and undergarment were torn by the blade, and a little stream of blood trickled forth, but the would-be assassin went down upon the pavement as though hit by a cannon ball.

Nick Carter met the other two with a smile in his eyes.

He loved danger, and gloried in a struggle.

With a well-aimed high kick, the detective struck one of the knives with the toe of his boot, and sent it flying through the air.

Then the other man was upon him.

Whish!

The steel blade cut through the air.

Very coolly Nick measured the distance and with a rapid clutch of his left hand caught the descending wrist.

His grip was of steel, his arm like an iron rod.

The assassin's hand was stayed in mid-air.

Then Nick struck out with his right hand.

He aimed for, and caught his man full upon the "apple."

There was a faint gurgle, one shudder, and then the fellow's head fell back, his right hand relaxed, and the knife fell with a metallic ring upon the sidewalk.

Nick Carter let go his hold upon the rascal's wrists, and down he fell in a heap upon the stones.

The detective drew his revolver and looked around him.

Stark's man was upon his feet, and making for the coach, while the confidential agent was looking at his wounded arm.

Close upon the heels of Stark's foe was the man who had been disarmed by Carter's well-directed kick.

They both leaped into the coach, and the driver yelled to the horses and applied his whip.

"Halt," cried Nick, pointing his pistol at the driver. "Halt, or I'll put a bullet through you."

The driver, however, did not halt, and not wishing to shoot a man who, presumably, had no direct connection with the matter, Nick Carter lowered his pistol.

"Anyhow, I have one of the rascals," thought he, "and I'll make him 'squeal' on the rest of the gang."

Windows and doorways in the vicinity now began to be peopled.

The man Nick Carter had knocked down was recovering.

Nick clutched him by the wrist, and raised him to his feet.

Then he turned to Stark.

"Are you hurt?"

"Only a mere scratch, that a piece of adhesive plaster will remedy."

"Then let us get away from here as soon as possible," said Nick, leading his prisoner along. "We'll soon know the truth of this when this chap fully recovers his senses."

In fact, the rascal was acting in a bewildered manner, and in fact it was only the painful pressure of the detective's flesh and bone "nippers" that induced him to walk.

Nick Carter had hit him so hard that he was, as boxers express it, "knocked silly."

"That was a most remarkable affair, I must say," observed Stark. "Could their object have been robbery?"

"Oh, no."

"What then?"

"Murder."

"But why should they want to murder us?"

"Because they were paid to do it."

"By whom?"

"That is hard to say."

"Do you think that our man may be in New York, know of my presence here, and set these assassins upon me?"

"That may be the true version of it," assented Nick. "Here, you rascal, stand up straight, or I'll break your bones!"

This last remark was addressed to the prisoner.

Nick Carter regarded him closely as he spoke.

"Soho!" he said, after a moment's scrutiny of the fellow's face, "soho, my dear bank robber, you've deserted the jimmy and the bellows for the knife, have you?"

The man seemed fully aroused by this.

He glared sullenly at Nick Carter.

"You don't know me," he growled.

"Yes, I do."

"I was never in New York before."

"I didn't say you were. Wilson & Co., of Baltimore, however, might recognize you."

The man grew deadly pale.

"You've made a mistake," he obstinately said. "I'm not the chap you take me to be."

"I'll tell you your name and give you your pedigree within ten minutes from now," asserted Nick.

"After that I'll ask you a few questions, which you'll answer."

At that moment they reached the precinct station house.

"Sit down in that chair," ordered the detective, and placed his prisoner in a chair before the desk. "Sergeant, stand an officer over him."

The request was complied with.

Stark also kept an eye upon the rascal, and was ready to knock him down if he attempted to leave the chair.

Then Nick Carter went to the telephone and called up the chief.

In less than five minutes he returned to the side of the prisoner.

"You are Jeremiah Morgan, alias Jerry, the Yank; you have served three terms in New York, one in Moyamensing and one in Weathersfield, and now you are wanted for the robbery committed at the bank of Wilson, Colston & Co., Baltimore, in 1892. I can give you five years here and ten years in Maryland."

The man shivered a little.

"On the other hand, I offer you your freedom if you will answer me a few questions," said the detective, in a low tone. "Give me the particulars of this job and you can go free."

"I dare not."

"What!"

"I repeat that I dare not."

"Then you dare risk a sentence of at least fifteen years?" said Nick.

"That is better than sure death," returned the man, with a perceptible shudder, that was observed by Nick Carter and Stark. "Two men well known to me were plucky enough to make a bargain to 'squeal' on the man I work for. They were both found dead, without a mark upon them."

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER VICTIM

"Without a mark?"

"Without a mark?"

The double echo came from Nick Carter and the confidential agent.

"Yes, without a mark," sullenly and dejectedly repeated the prisoner.

"And you fear that you might meet with the same fate?" questioned Nick.

"Yes."

"I'll remove that fear."

"You can't."

"But I will. I'll lock you up until I collar the man who murders people without leaving a mark."

"What good will that do?"

"Why, he'll not get at you through prison doors."

"Yes, he will."

The man's face expressed an abject terror that was singular.

"You don't know what you are talking about," he whispered. "The two men who were done for, old pals of mine, and cunning chaps, too, were stowed away safe enough, it was thought, but for all that they died."

"Why, this is astonishing!" muttered Stark.

"It is, and evidently, now, owing to the power of money," the detective said. "This fellow evidently has a superstitious dread of the murderer, who has succeeded in terrifying his tools to insure their faithfulness."

"Don't be a fool, Jerry," he continued, turning to the prisoner. "I'll engage that nobody shall reach you in your cell."

The man shook his head.

"Why, see," went on Nick, "downstairs you go, and the doorman has orders to admit nobody to see you except on my order.

"Then you give me the information I want.

"Armed with that, I arrest my man, put him in the stone jug, and within the next forty-eight hours he is on his way to Sing Sing for a term of years.

"Meanwhile, and until he is in his striped togs, you will remain here in your cell.

"How, then, can any harm come to you?"

Still the man shook his head.

"If you put me in a bank vault with a combination lock, then I wouldn't be safe.

"Bah! You'll not make me squeal," was the dogged return.

"You're a fool."

"I would be if I squealed."

"I pledge you my word that you'll get fifteen years."

"Anything is better than sure death."

It was useless to argue with Jerry, the Yank, and Nick Carter recognized the fact.

"Perhaps you think I can't send you up," he remarked. "I'll put you downstairs for a few hours, and when I come back and show you the proofs in black and white you may feel more inclined to speak out."

The man maintained an obstinate silence, and Nick turned to the sergeant at the desk.

"Sergeant, have this man put in a good cell, and allow nobody to see him unless on an order from me."

"Very well, Mr. Carter."

The detective saw his prisoner safely stowed away, and then departed from the station house in company with Stark.

"I never met with such a stumbling block in my whole life!" remarked Nick.

"As the terror these hired assassins feel for their master?"

"That's it. It is a perfect stumbling block. Now, I was confident that I could make that fellow squeal, and thus get at the bottom of the assassination business, but I feel now it will be a difficult job to make him split."

"Have you got proofs to show him?" the confidential agent asked.

"Oh, yes, and when I lay them before him I think I shall make the rascal talk. Then you may depend upon it, the result will either bring the murderer of Charles Deems into my clutches, or else will bring us face to face with Mordaunt Clare."

"So I think!" said Stark. "However, it is plain that we have to deal with uncommon foes, and must be constantly on guard to save our lives."

"True. Are you armed?"

"Yes, I carry a good revolver, and then I have my hands."

"Yes, and I think you know how to use them!" smiled Nick.

"Well, I make no boast of it, but I have won the Marquis of Queensberry cup for amateur boxing," said Stark.

"You bowled over the man that tackled you in fine style," remarked Nick. "Well, we move in constant danger, as you observe, but I think our foes will find us a hard team to beat."

It was not until after supper that Nick was prepared to visit the cell where he had left his prisoner. He had, meantime, visited the chief of police and obtained what he wanted.

"I've got everything in apple-pie order," he said to Stark, exhibiting a bundle of papers. "When I show him these records and proofs he may wilt."

"Yes, he may," said Stark, "but I am doubtful if you'll terrify him as much as his superstition makes him fear his murderous master."

They reached the station, and walked in.

The same sergeant was still at the desk.

"I wish to have a talk with my prisoner," said Nick.

"Certainly. Doorman, take Mr. Carter and his friend downstairs." Keys in hand, the doorman led the way.

He unlocked the cell door, and then pulled it open.

Nick Carter and Stark entered.

The prisoner lay stretched out at full length upon the long bench at the back of the cell.

"Well, what's the use of having a conscience?" smilingly said Stark. "How sweetly that rascal sleeps after trying to murder a man."

"Come, wake up!" cried Nick, taking the prisoner by the shoulder and shaking him roughly.

But he didn't wake up.

A startling thought flashed across the detective's mind.

The gas was burning brightly in the corridor without.

He seized the prisoner by the arms, dragged him from the bench, and hauled him out into the well-lit hallway.

The gaslight streamed down upon Jerry Morgan's upturned face.

It was very white.

Nick Carter knelt by Morgan's side, and placed his hand over the prisoner's heart.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Stark.

"Dead, that's all," bitterly returned the detective. "Dead and beyond my reach."

"Dead?" cried Stark.

"Dead?" echoed the doorman.

"Yes, dead," growled Nick. "Some blunder has been committed. Let us carry him upstairs, and send for a doctor."

The still form of Morgan was taken up by Nick and the doorman and conveyed upstairs.

"What's up with him?" demanded the sergeant.

"Dead," responded Nick Carter.

"Thunder! How in the world did he die?"

"Through some neglect or blunder on your part," bluntly returned Nick.

"On my part?"

"Yes. I instructed you to let nobody see him."

"And," snapped the sergeant, "nobody has seen him except the man you sent."

Nick Carter and Stark glanced understandingly at one another.

They both began to dimly perceive the truth.

"Oh, the man I sent," responded Nick. "What did he do?"

"He merely presented your order, stayed about five minutes with the prisoner, and then walked out."

"Well, permit me to tell you that I've sent no order, and neither have I sent any man."

"Thunder!" again explosively remarked the sergeant. "A man presented an order signed by you, written on the official note-head of the police department, and I never doubted for a moment that it was perfectly straight."

"Have you got the order?"

"I think so."

While the sergeant was looking for the order, an officer was sent for the nearest doctor.

"Here it is," announced the sergeant, and handed over the false order upon which he had admitted an unknown person to Morgan's cell.

Nick Carter read it carefully, with but one idea in view.

"Is it like your handwriting?"

It was Stark who asked the question.

"Not a bit like mine, and therefore no attempt at a forgery. See whether it is familiar to you."

He handed it to Stark.

"How is it possible that it can be familiar to—— By Jove!"

The confidential agent suddenly interrupted himself, and stood in an attitude of sudden wonder, gazing intently at the paper.

"What's up?" asked Nick.

Without a question, Stark took two letters from his pocket.

He opened them, spread them out upon the desk, and then placed them side by side with the false order.

"Look at them, all three," he said to Nick Carter.

The detective gave them a close inspection.

"They are all much alike," was his comment. "I should say the same hand wrote the letters and the order."

"So I think," said Stark. "In fact, I feel positive about it."

"And who wrote the letters?"

"Mordaunt Clare!"

The two men gazed blankly at one another.

"More mystery," muttered Nick. "If Percy Lang instigated that murderous attack upon me, why should Mordaunt Clare come here and kill this Morgan? It is a much mixed up and very puzzling sort of a case."

He turned to the sergeant.

"What sort of a man presented the order?"

"An old man, tall, round-shouldered, plainly-dressed, and wearing a long white beard and very long white hair. He had on spectacles or eye-glasses, too."

"Evidently a person in the plot," suggested the confidential agent.

"Without doubt," returned Nick. "By the way, doorman, search that cell in the most thorough manner, and bring me anything you may find in it."

"All right, sir."

"Don't let so much as a pin be left there."

"I'll not, sir."

The doorman withdrew.

In came a professional-looking gentleman of fifty.

"You sent for a doctor?" he said, looking at the sergeant.

"Yes," put in Nick, "we did. Please examine that man."

"Why, he's dead."

"As we know. Give us your opinion as to the probable cause of his death."

The physician made a careful examination.

"I should say that he died of some heart trouble," he at length announced.

"That's what they all said about the murdered Wallingfords," put in Stark. "There can be no doubt that this man died by the same means that brought about their death."

"The perfect repose of the body and the face," said the doctor, "lead me to believe that he went to sleep and died without waking."

"That sometimes happens where the heart is affected?"

"Yes."

"Well, it didn't happen in this instance, my learned friend," returned the detective, "for this man was quietly murdered."

"Nonsense," exclaimed the doctor.

"We know that he was."

"How?"

"Ah! there's the mystery."

"Why," protested the doctor, "there is no sign of violence, nor, in fact, any mark upon him."

"That's just it. He has been murdered without a mark."

"Pooh! pooh!" puffed the doctor, and taking the fee

tendered him by the detective, he bolted from the station in great rage.

Back came the doorman from his search in the cell.

"This is all I found. It was on the floor of the cell," he said, handing Nick a pocketbook.

The detective opened it eagerly.

He saw at once that it must have dropped from the pocket of the man who had entered Morgan's cell.

Inside the pocketbook were a memorandum book and a card, dirty, well-thumbed and somewhat torn.

Nick's eyes sparkled when he saw the latter.

He held it up so that Stark could read it.

"Italo Mario, M. D."

"Is that all?" said Stark.

"And quite enough, I should say, if the memorandum book gives us any facts!" said Nick. "Let us take that in hand."

Nick was delighted to see a number of entries.

He rapidly glanced over a number of unimportant items, and at length came to the following:

"For Future Reference.

"M. C.: High, thin nose, sharp as any knife; projecting upper lip, receding lower one. Retreating chin. Eyebrows perfectly arched.

"P. L.: Flat nose, eyebrows curved upward after running out straight from nose, receding upper lip and protruding lower one, and the chin prominent and pointed.

"There is a fortune in this!"

Nick Carter read it aloud to Stark.

The confidential agent looked at the detective, and the detective looked at the confidential agent.

"What does it mean?" demanded Stark.

"That's what I want to know."

"The descriptions are those of Mordaunt Clare and Percy Lang."

"That is evident, and it is equally plain that this Morgan knew both men well."

"Ay, and what strikes me as odd is the fact that he couples their names in one item of his memorandum book."

"Yes, and declares at the bottom of the item that there is a fortune in it."

"Ah, if he were living we could soon choke the truth from his lips."

"Well, he is dead, and we must find out in another way," responded the detective. "This is the greatest case that I ever handled, and I'm not going to give it up, even though I meet with a new mystery at every turn."

"Can you see anything upon which to seize as a start?" asked Stark.

"Yes," promptly returned Nick. "Here is my idea:

"From the terms of the item in the book it appears that Morgan knew both Clare and Lang.

"Morgan's acquaintance with Percy Lang dated, presumably, from the time when the latter was a patient under the hands of the Italian doctor. Is it not fair to assume that he made the acquaintance of Mordaunt Clare in exactly the same way?"

"Yes."

"Then, additionally, isn't it more than likely that there is some connection between Clare and Lang?"

"Yes, you are right. What do you think the connection is?"

"I think they are related—cousins, perhaps—despite the belief that Clare is the last of his race."

"It may be."

"If such be the case," continued the detective, "we can easily understand that Clare instructed Lang how to murder without a mark."

"A good theory," commented the confidential agent. "But how are you going to get at these facts?"

"Two men knew them, Morgan and the doctor. Morgan is dead, and so the doctor must be found. When I find him—and that should not be a very difficult task—he shall either make terms with me, or else I'll force the secret from his lips at the point of the knife. Deep and wonderful as this double affair is, I'll yet make everything as plain as the light of day. I swear I'll unravel this mystery, or I'll die trying."

CHAPTER IV.

A DEEP-LAID PLOT.

On one of the most fashionable streets of New York, not far from Fifth Avenue, lived Richard Wells, a man who was highly respected by his associates.

The other members of his family were his wife and his daughter, Minnie, the latter a beautiful girl and a great belle.

On the night of the day that the body of Charles Deems was found, Percy Lang drove up to the door of the Wells mansion.

It was about ten o'clock when he arrived there.

Some young friends of the girl, who lived in the neighborhood, were making a call upon her, and there was singing and music in the parlor.

A singular smile crossed Percy Lang's face as he heard the merry sounds.

"She is not breaking her heart about Charlie Deems," he muttered to himself. "I fancy I'll not have a great deal of trouble to succeed in my plans. After all, she is only a woman, and most women are to be won by the same means."

He rang the bell, and at once the door was opened by a servant.

"I wish to see Miss Wells," announced Percy Lang.

"Not at home," said the servant, in that style which means "not at home to you."

"Oh, but I know she is," persisted Lang.

"Not at home, sir."

"Is your eyesight good?"

"Very good, sir."

"Do you know what that is?" and he shoved a banknote into the man's hand.

The fellow trembled all over with excitement.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I can see that it's a fifty-dollar bill."

"Then shove it in your pocket and announce me to the company. I'll give you another one like it when I leave the house, and if you lose your situation through the little affair I'll hire you myself at an increased salary."

That settled it.

The servant threw open the door of the parlor, and announced:

"Mr. Lang."

With his coat over his arm, and his hat in his hand, Percy Lang entered the room.

He was elegantly dressed, and wore a fortune in diamonds.

His manner was that of perfect good-breeding, and although Minnie Wells felt rather annoyed, she knew that she could only blame the servant who had admitted him.

She advanced to receive him with formal courtesy.

She looked very beautiful this evening, and Lang thought he had never seen anything lovelier.

"Miss Wells," he said, in his refined manner, "you will excuse the lateness of this call, when you learn the motive that prompted it. I have been told you take an active part in charity."

"It is true," she admitted. "I devote a great deal of time to charitable work, and wish my means permitted me to do more."

"That is just to the point. You help the poor of the neighborhood?"

"As much as I can."

"Exactly. If I place a sum of money in your hands to buy coal, food and clothing for the poor, will you kindly disburse the money?"

Charity was Minnie's hobby.

Lang had made a master stroke.

The girl's eyes sparkled with delight, and she put forth her hands in an impulsive style.

"Willingly! gladly!" she said. "Oh! you cannot imagine how much joy it is to me to relieve the poor. Oh! I have misjudged you, Mr. Lang."

He smiled to himself as he grasped her outstretched hand.

"I shall place a fund at your disposal," he said, "and shall add to it from time to time. If you will conduct me to the library, I will write you out a check."

"At once!" excitedly returned Minnie.

She excused herself to her friends, and conducted Lang to the neat library on the same floor.

Lang quietly closed the door, and then sat down at a desk.

"I'll make the first check for five thousand," he said.

"Five thousand dollars?" screamed the beautiful girl.

"Certainly."

"Oh! that's too much."

"Why, it's a mere trifle. I sometimes spend that for a dinner. There is your check, and you can have another for that, or ten times that amount, whenever your poor people need it from you."

"Oh, thanks! But it does seem such a lot of money to me."

Percy Lang lifted his overcoat from the chair where he had carelessly thrown it, and drew forth a large morocco case from a side pocket.

Unclasping the case, he exposed its contents.

They were a magnificent necklace of diamonds, with solitaire earrings to match.

They flashed and blazed with a most dazzling brilliancy, for every stone was of perfect water, and cut in the most scientific manner.

They almost blinded Minnie, who gasped for breath as she gazed down upon their wondrous loveliness.

She was only a woman, after all, and had a feminine love for dress and jewels.

"They are the grandest I ever saw in my life," she murmured.

"Have you any idea of their value?" he asked.

"I have not. I can see that they are worth an immense fortune."

"Oh, no, a mere trifle, I assure you," he said, in his most careless style. "Positively a mere trifle of money."

"Did you buy them?"

"Certainly."

"What did they cost?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars," coolly replied Percy Lang.

"Two hundred thousand dollars?"

"Not a dollar more, I assure you."

"And that is a mere trifle?"

"To me."

"You must be very rich, Mr. Lang?"

"I suppose I am. I'm sure I don't know. My stewards tell me I am worth some millions—ten, twenty or thirty—they hardly know, and I'm sure I don't care. Those diamonds were worn for two hundred years by people of royal blood only, and are not to be excelled by any in the world."

With a dexterous movement of his hands, he threw the necklace about her throat and clasped it.

"Oh, Mr. Lang," exclaimed Minnie; but there was a mirror right opposite, and she caught the gleam of the diamonds and could not utter another word.

He arose from his chair, and stood before her in an eloquent attitude.

"Miss Wells, you think the diamonds are beautiful, and you think they become you. Please accept them as a slight token of my regard."

Before the astonished girl could make any answer, he went on in a very impassioned tone:

"Miss Wells, I can truly say that I do not know my own riches. I am of noble birth, and my ancestors have left me more money than I can ever spend.

"Queens enjoy luxury, but they might sigh in vain for what my wife may enjoy at pleasure.

"Her humblest home would be more beautiful than any palace in the old lands, troops of servants would obey her slightest wish, and all the pleasures of the world would come at the magic of her gold. Miss Wells, I admire you more than any woman I ever met, and my hand and my fortune I lay at your feet."

Bewildered, at a loss to guess the end of his long statement, the beautiful girl had listened to him in silence.

Now, however, a crimson flush crept into her cheeks, and she very quickly removed the magnificent diamonds from her neck.

"Mr. Lang," she said, "did I not tell you that I was engaged?"

"Yes, but isn't he dead?"

"Dead!" shrieked Minnie, and came near fainting.

"Certainly. Didn't you hear that he was found dead this morning?"

A light broke over the astonished girl's mind.

"Ah!" she cried. "Now I see what emboldened you to offer me your hand in marriage. You thought Charles Deems was my betrothed?"

"Yes."

"You were in error. I am the promised wife of Henry Cunningham!"

"Curse the luck!" hissed Lang through his teeth, his rage impelling him to utter the words.

As quick as thought a suspicion flashed through the mind of the shrewd young woman.

There was a world of meaning in the tones of Percy Lang.

To Minnie's ears it sounded as though Lang were cursing himself for having committed an error.

She turned swiftly upon him, and her magnificent eyes flashed like twin stars as she said:

"Did you murder him because you thought he stood between you and me?"

Lang turned ghastly pale under the direct accusation.

He staggered back under the straight glance of those lovely eyes, and grasped the back of the chair for support.

"Why, why—er what an awful accusation to make against me, Miss Wells!" he stammered. "You really took my breath away. The idea of me committing a murder!"

"Why, then, did you say 'Curse the luck!' when you found out that Deems was nothing to me?"

"Because I thought I had no rival now, and find that I have one, after all. Miss Wells, I beg your pardon, and wish you good-night."

"Good-night," she said, stiffly, and away went Lang.

When he had thrown himself into his carriage he cursed for five minutes without stopping.

"What a fool I've been," he wrathfully muttered. "I might have known that no such man as Deems could ever have won the heart of such a woman."

He rode on in moody silence until he reached his house.

"Wait here," he said to the coachman, and entered the house.

He was met by a crafty-looking man of fifty, well-dressed and very genteel in his style.

"Simmons, come into my room for a minute."

"Very well, sir."

They both retired to Percy Lang's superb apartment, where the latter, after drinking a glass of wine and lighting a cigar, turned abruptly to the man and said:

"Simmons, go over the particulars of that story about the property once more."

"I will. Charles Wallingford was the eldest of three brothers. He inherited the vast estates and other properties.

"The terms of the will were such that if he died without issue, everything went to the next brother.

"Charles did die, and it was thought without issue. The next brother got everything.

"As a matter of fact, Charles had wedded a poor but very beautiful girl, legally enough, too, but secretly, and when he died the poor widow was unable to prove her claim because she had lost her marriage certificate, forgotten the name of the minister, and also that of the witness.

"She had not lost the certificate.

"It had been stolen!

"It had come beneath the eyes of a former lover just about the time that Charles died. The lover saw plainly enough that he could never hope to win the enormously rich widow, but might easily enough get the very poor one, so he stole the certificate.

"This, in course of time, threw the widow in his arms. He made love to her through her child, and soon won her.

"He was a thrifty young man, and on coming to this country he soon made quite a snug sum."

"And this man is Richard Wells?"

"Yes."

"And Minnie is the true heir to all that untold wealth?"

"Exactly."

"That will do."

"Tell me, Simmons, do you think Sir Charles Wallingford's marriage certificate is in existence?"

"Yes, I do."

"What makes you think so?"

"The fact that Richard Wells was not a bad man, although he stole the paper in order to make sure of the widow."

"You think he has it still?"

"Yes," promptly answered Simmons. "It would be just like such a man to make the young girl a wedding present of the document, and tell her husband to go to England and claim the property. Whoever held it would be willing to divide, sooner than stand a lawsuit with every chance of losing."

"It's a hundred to one that you are right," said Lang. "Now, Simmons, I did have an idea of putting the girl out of the way."

"Which would be the safest plan for you."

"Very true, but it's a mighty risky thing to do while that iron-armed detective is living."

"Nick Carter?"

"Yes."

"He'd kill you on suspicion."

"That's what I think. Now, if that paper is in Richard Wells' possession, it might be easy to obtain."

"And once obtained, you could snap your fingers."

"Exactly."

"If you want me to tackle the job," said Simmons, "I'll do it. If that marriage certificate is in the house I'll get it for you."

"Good enough. But are you sure it is in existence? How do you know that Wells stole it?"

"My sister was the sole servant at the cottage where the young couple lived. She saw Richard Wells take the certificate from a drawer of the young wife's bureau, and taxed him with it. He gave her quite a nice little sum of money, and she kept her mouth shut."

"That's straight enough, then," said Percy Lang. "Without doubt, the marriage certificate is at this moment among Richard Wells' private papers."

"Then shall I try for it?" asked Simmons.

"Yes, get it, and I'll make you independent for life."

"It's a bargain," cried Simmons, his eyes blazing with greed. "You promise me a fortune, eh? This, then, is the job of my career. I must and will succeed, no matter what stands in my way."

"That's the way to talk," approvingly observed Percy Lang. "If you fail, however, there is but one course to be followed."

"What is that?"

"My mind must be made easy, and the girl must die!"

"Why not marry her?"

"Because she won't have me."

"Then that settles it."

"Yes, and I might remark, with the villain in the melodrama, 'either my bride, or else the bride of death.'"

"Anything else?"

"No; go."

And Simmons disappeared.

Percy Lang paced up and down the room, absorbed in thought.

Half an hour passed by.

The door bell pealed forth its clear alarm.

The next moment a servant came in, with a card in his hand.

Percy Lang glanced at the card, and then scowled.

"Italo Mario, M. D."

The servant waited.

Lang's fingers worked nervously for a moment.

"Curse the old fool," he growled, an impatient glare in his eyes. "What does he want now?"

For a moment longer he eyed the card with that scowling glance, and then said, abruptly:

"Show him in."

The servant bowed, left the room, and the next moment ushered the visitor in.

Dr. Italo Mario was a man of not more than sixty years of age, tall, well-made, dark, and evidently well-preserved.

His face was very intelligent, but what would have attracted attention at once was the enormously high and broad forehead. He was evidently a man of genius, and also of great force.

"Ah, my dear doctor," effusively said Lang. "I am very pleased, indeed, to see you."

"Thanks."

"Be seated."

"I will. You are looking remarkably happy and prosperous."

"I am both."

"Since you left my care, I have made it my business to inquire somewhat into your history," coolly remarked the doctor.

"Indeed."

"Yes. I make it a custom to do so with all my patients."

"Well, you found my history an untarnished one, I believe?" Lang remarked.

The Italian doctor looked him squarely in the eye.

"Do you so believe?"

Lang seemed somewhat disconcerted by the question.

"Bah!" he exclaimed, "I am not going to discuss my private affairs with you. What is the cause of this visit?"

"Well, you will pardon me," smoothly returned the doctor, "but I must speak about your private affairs, my dear Mr. Lang."

"Oh, well, suit yourself. What have you to say?"

"I have to say that my inquiries resulted in my learning that you were not merely rich, but wealthy beyond the extent of your own knowledge. That, in fact, you could hardly estimate your possessions."

"Well, and what further?" sharply demanded Lang.

"Pardon me, you seem to be losing your temper."

"Don't beat about the bush, then, you old fox. What do you want?"

"Well, let me tell you in my own way. I had quite a fortune, a very considerable fortune I estimated it, invested in a foreign scheme, one that promised to net me more than I could spend in a hundred years.

"This fortune, nearly my all, has been lost, sunk in the scheme that proved a disastrous failure.

"I am an old man, too old to ever make another fortune, and, for that matter, not inclined to work for one when I can obtain it more easily.

"Mr. Percy Lang, do you understand now what I want?"

"Yes, money."

"I do. I have come to you for a loan."

"A highwayman might as well ask his victim for loan."

"You are coarse, vulgar."

"How much do you want?"

"A mere trifle to you, who cannot count your money."

"Name the sum."

"One hundred thousand dollars!"

"Indeed?"

"It is a trifle."

"It is a trifle you will never get from me."

"You will change your mind."

"I shall not."

"Oh, I am sure you will. Suppose I should publish the great secret of your life?"

"You would be laughed at and looked upon as a lunatic. Who would give credit to your story?"

"Anybody, everybody, when backed by the proofs I can exhibit."

"Bah!"

"You will change your tune."

"You must change your demand," said Percy Lang. "It is absurd to ask for so much money."

"Nonsense; it is more absurd for a man of your wealth to speak as though it amounted to anything. I am sure you are worth millions of money."

"I am overrated."

"Tell the truth, and say that you are beginning to love money as any miser loves it."

"Well, I'll not give you what you ask, and you may make up your mind to it."

"When you have thought it over for a couple of days you will change your mind."

"Never. Come and see me again, doctor, but with a more moderate demand. Will you drink a glass of wine with me?"

"No."

"Why, you love wine, and to my certain knowledge drink a bottle or two every day."

"Very true."

"Why, then, will you refuse to drink with me?"

The doctor stood up and eyed the young man derisively.

"My dear sir," he said, "do you think I am as big a fool as that fellow Morgan?"

An almost imperceptible flush passed across the face of the host.

"I don't understand you."

"Neither did poor Morgan, or he would now be alive," returned the doctor, with a harsh laugh.

"What do you mean?"

"That you killed him. Come, don't try to make a fool of me, for I'm your superior. Now you are an ungrateful

dog, and I say it very plainly, because I do not fear you in the least.

"I am as cunning as you, my friend, and can be as deadly, too, if I wish.

"You are an ungrateful dog. Without my aid you might now be an inmate of a prison, perhaps swung from the gallows.

"I give you two more days in which to consider my proposition. If, at the expiration of that time, you do not bring or send me the sum I name, I'll expose you!"

And with rage the doctor turned away and left the room.

Percy Lang watched him descending the steps.

"He is getting dangerous," he muttered, an evil light in his eyes. "The money he asks is a mere trifle, but I dare not grant it, for he would continue to blackmail me until he had drawn millions from me.

"Forty-eight hours, eh? That is all the time I ask, doctor. I'll get rid of you for far less money than it would take to buy your silence."

CHAPTER V.

A GHASTLY DEED.

It was half an hour after midnight.

For over an hour the lights of the Wells mansion had been out.

The family had retired early.

A man dressed in dark clothing had waited on the opposite side of the street for the inmates of the house to go to bed, and was yet standing in a dark corner.

Not until one o'clock struck from a neighboring church tower did he cross the street, which at that hour was silent and deserted.

With a cautious tread, he ascended the front steps.

The faint rays of a distant street lamp were sufficient to permit him to see the keyhole.

He had a key in his hand, and this he tried with a great deal of care.

It fitted to the lock and the man turned it.

Noiselessly the door swung open upon well-oiled hinges.

Entering the dark hallway, which was well carpeted and gave back no sound to the pressure of the foot, the man softly reclosed the door.

Then, a minute later, a tiny point of flame appeared. A match blazed up brightly, and a small bull's-eye lantern soon shed a guarded light along the hallway.

The man, having satisfied himself that all was still around him, fixed the lantern to a belt he wore about his waist.

Then he carefully removed his shoes and deposited them in a corner near the door.

After that he produced a long, keen, murderous-looking knife, and fixed it in the belt.

Then he fixed a black mask over his face, adjusting it with great care, and started up the stairs in his stocking feet.

Of course his progress was quite free from noise.

He reached the next floor.

Here were three rooms.

The doors were all closed.

However, there were transoms above them all.

A chair in the hallway served the present purpose of the midnight intruder. Getting upon it, he was enabled to peer into the room.

In one room he saw Minnie fast asleep.

In another room he saw a servant, and heard her snore.

In the third room, Richard Wells and his wife were sleeping in a manner to delight the heart of a burglar.

The intruder got carefully down, and then muttered:

"All asleep; I don't think I need to use any drug, and I'll not do it unless I'm forced to work on this floor. The library must be directly underneath here, and that's where I'll find the paper. He'd not keep it in his bedroom, I think, for fear his wife might discover it, while some odd drawer in a library desk would be just the spot to place such a thing."

He turned away and carefully descended the stairs.

The lower floor was again reached.

Straight to the library went the man in the mask.

The door was locked.

A skeleton key soon removed the obstruction, and the visitor entered the library.

Here, for the sake of doing his work better, he removed his mask.

Then he detached the lantern from his belt, set it on a shelf and turned on the full light.

As he had expected, there was a large, well-made desk in the library, and it looked as though it might contain any number of odd recesses and secret drawers.

With a bunch of small keys the intruder opened drawer after drawer, and hastily ransacked the contents of each.

Not finding what he sought, the burglar stopped a moment and studied the construction of the big desk.

"Where are the secret drawers?" he muttered, looking intently at the article of furniture.

"What's that to you?" demanded a voice at the door.

With a swift movement, the burglar wheeled about.

In the doorway, with a revolver in his hand, stood the master of the house, Richard Wells.

The broad, ample light from the bull's-eye lantern fell upon the stern face, and, looking at it, the man who had dared to enter the house at midnight knew that Wells would not permit him to make his escape.

Without a word, he made a swift rush at Wells.

As he moved he drew the long knife from his belt.

Wells had seen his face.

He could identify him and have him arrested.

To merely assault him with the knife, knock him down, either wounded or unwounded, and then make his escape, would not do.

It was his liberty against Wells' life, so he made up his mind that Wells had to die.

"You'll not escape me," cried the master of the house, and raised his weapon.

The burglar made a combined movement.

With one hand he caught the right wrist of his opponent, and thus pointed the pistol toward the ceiling.

With the other hand he drove the blade of his knife into the breast of his foe.

At the same instant the pistol went off, but the ball flew up to the ceiling.

The burglar let go his hold, and Richard Wells fell to the floor, the blood gushing in a swift stream from his wound.

Shrieks rang out from the floor above, a man's heavy

footstep was heard quickly descending the top flight of stairs, and it was evident that the household was alarmed.

Time was precious.

The burglar must fly.

There was no time to seize either his lamp or his keys, nor did he deem it prudent to hunt in the hallway for his boots, but with a terrified rush he dashed through the front doorway, banged it behind him, and disappeared.

Down the stairs came the manservant employed by the family, followed by the wife and daughter of the poor gentleman who lay dying in the library.

They all saw the light, and very naturally turned that way.

Shriek after shriek went up from Mrs. Wells and Minnie when they saw Richard Wells lying there in a pool of his own blood, the red life-current flowing rapidly from his breast.

Minnie was the first to recover her presence of mind.

"Run for a doctor," she said to the manservant, and then, kneeling by the side of the wounded man, she caught up a towel that was near at hand and pressed it against the wound.

Richard Wells opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"It is useless," he said.

"Oh, papa," she sobbed.

She loved him dearly, for he was kind and indulgent.

"I am doomed," he said. "The assassin's knife went close to my heart, and I can feel my life ebbing away."

His wife, crazed, frantic, could only moan with unalterable grief.

"I am dying!" calmly said Richard Wells, "murdered by a burglar whom I surprised ransacking the drawers of yonder desk.

"My time is limited, and no doctor can save me.

"Minnie, before I go, I want to say something to your mother.

"Kiss me good-by, my sweet girl, and then leave us alone. Have I been a good father to you?"

"The dearest, the best," passionately sobbed the girl, and then she pressed her lips to his in a farewell kiss, and was borne from the room by the servant, half unconscious. Then the wife, roused from her stupor by the terrible necessity of the moment, in turn knelt by the side of her husband, and pressed the blood-stained towel to the wound.

"I must be brief," almost whispered Richard Wells. "Darling, you remember that I was your lover long before your titled husband married you.

"When he died, and I thought that you might become an enormously wealthy lady, I resolved to prevent such a possibility—to keep you poor, and to marry you.

"To effect my purpose, moved to it by my love, I abstracted your marriage certificate from your bureau drawer, and have kept it ever since. I have loved and cherished both you and your daughter, and now that I am dying, I ask for your forgiveness and make the secret known. The paper is in yonder desk—ah—I choke—it will—reinstate—good-by—ah!"

He fell back dead!

CHAPTER VI.

THE MISSING CERTIFICATE.

In the graw dawn of early morning Nick Carter was aroused from his sleep by a sharp ring at the bell, and going to the door, found the manservant from the Wells mansion.

In a brief way the servant told him what had occurred, and that his mistress, having heard of the great detective, had sent at once for him.

Nick Carter was astonished.

"Killed your master?"

"Yes, sir."

"Somebody stabbed him, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"In the library?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you know about it?" asked the detective.

The man was dead, and nothing he might do could bring him back to life.

Here was a person who might be able to put him in the way of obtaining a clew.

To find the murderer was the great object now, and therefore Nick Carter delayed hastening to the Wells house in order to question the servant, which, whatever he did know of the matter, was fresh in his mind.

"I can't tell you much, sir," said the latter. "I sleep in the back room on the top floor, and being a bit struck on a book, I was reading for an hour or so after the family had gone to bed.

"Suddenly, I heard a pistol shot downstairs, and away I went as fast as I could run, to see what was the matter.

"At the same time the women began screaming, and they followed me downstairs.

"Just as I began to descend the lower flight of stairs, I heard the front door shut with a bang.

"We ran to the library. The door had been locked, but now it was wide open.

"A bull's-eye lantern burned on a little shelf. The drawers of the big desk were all open, and tumbled about. A big bunch of small skeleton keys lay upon the floor, and alongside the doorway lay the master, dying.

"He told us that he had surprised a burglar in the room, and that the fellow had stabbed him and made his escape."

"Whose pistol went off?"

"Master's."

"Hurt anybody?"

"The bullet struck the ceiling."

"Has anything been touched in the library since then?"

"Not a thing. Misses said not to touch anything until you gave the word."

"That's sensible. Did your master ever keep any valuables in that desk?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"It's a strange place for a burglar to work in," mused Nick Carter. "Was anything stolen from any other part of the house?"

"Not a thing."

"Very odd. He must have been in quest of some papers."

He turned, put on his hat and coat, and left the house in company with the servant.

Arrived at the Wells house, he immediately made for the scene of the murder.

The library exhibited every sign of the visit of the burglar, and of the very tragical termination of it. Only the bloody corpse of the victim was lacking.

At the doorway Nick Carter came to a halt, and allowed his sharp eyes to roam about the room.

He could see nothing beyond what had been described by the shrewd manservant.

There was the bull's-eye lantern on the elevated shelf, the large bunch of small skeleton keys on the floor, and the disordered drawers.

Long and intently the detective looked at the room, the carpet of which still exhibited the red stain left by Richard Wells' life-blood.

He picked up the keys, and looked closely at them.

They gave him no light.

The bull's-eye lantern was taken down and examined.

It afforded no clew.

Out into the hall the detective strayed, thinking deeply.

In a corner of the hall, just beyond the hatstand, he saw a pair of boots.

He picked them up, and then called the servant.

"Whose boots are these?"

"I don't know."

"They were not here when you left the hall last night?"

"No, sir."

"You heard the burglar shut the front door?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you hear his footsteps?"

"No, sir."

"Then he was in his stockings, and these boots are his."

He examined them narrowly; there was nothing to be learned from them, nor would there ever be, unless he found the man to whom they belonged.

Very thoughtfully, he walked back to the library.

A newspaper, lying upon the floor, attracted his attention.

Now, there was nothing surprising about a newspaper lying upon the floor of a library, but there was something about the general appearance of this one which led him to believe that there was something under it.

He approached, and lifted it with a careful hand.

His conjecture was correct.

There was something lying under the paper.

It was a mask!

The mask was composed of paper, and was evidently a home-made affair.

Some sheets of writing paper had been employed in its construction, which was not without a certain skill, and it had been molded by hand when moist.

Nick Carter looked closely at it.

Detectives have a habit of looking for clews in the smallest and most unpromising "finds."

The front of the mask was covered with ink, and revealed nothing. The back of the mask, or what may properly be termed the inside, at once engaged his attention.

He could see that some writing had been done upon the sheet that composed the inner layer of the several comprising the mask. He peered closely at it, and then brought it under the strong rays of the bull's-eye.

Then the characters, although somewhat faint, were legible.

"J. Edward Simmons, Esq.

"Joseph Edward Simmons, Esq.

"Percy Lang, Esq.

"Mordaunt Clare, Esq.

"Sir J. Edward Simmons."

That is what he saw, and said Nick Carter, in bewilderment:

"What does all this confounded nonsense mean?

"Let me think.

"It means, positively, that this mask was made and probably worn by either Simmons, Lang or Clare.

"Which of the three?

"Simmons, most likely, because his name is scribbled at least three times, while the names of Lang and Clare are scribbled but once.

"Clare and Lang I know about, but who is Simmons?

"Let me think this out on a sensible scale.

"This mask is a home-made affair.

"On one of the sheets of paper composing it somebody, presumably Simmons, has scribbled his name in an exceedingly consequential style, such as a man might do who expected to become a person of consequence."

At this point Nick Carter's reflections were interrupted by the entrance of the widow, who briefly recounted the scene that had taken place between herself and her dying husband.

It is needless to say that Nick was astounded to find the Wallingford case so closely connected with the murder of Mr. Wells. He thought to himself:

"Can it be possible that this man Simmons, whoever he may be, has been hired by either Clare or Lang to get the marriage certificate?

"Well, it's a good theory. They probably offered a small fortune for that bit of paper. But where is it?"

"Now let us look for the marriage certificate," said Mrs. Wells. "I would do nothing in this room until you came."

Together they set to work, beginning an earnest search in the desk.

In the course of half an hour the detective, keeping one idea in his mind, noticed that the panel of a certain portion of the desk was covered with a group of flowers, totally unlike anything else in the way of ornamentation that he had seen about the piece of furniture.

He studied the flowers a moment, and then pressed the centers of several of them in succession.

Suddenly, as though pressing on a concealed spring, a small door flew open.

Within the receptacle thus exposed lay a neatly-folded paper, somewhat yellow with age.

The instant the widow saw it, she cried out:

"That is it!"

And then nearly fainted.

Nick Carter opened the document, and found that it was, indeed, the certificate of marriage.

"This then, establishes the claim of your daughter Minnie to a great fortune. Now, trust to me to hunt down the murderer of your husband. I am on his track, and he cannot escape me!"

Nick Carter's first action, after leaving the house, was to seek out Stark and tell him all that had occurred.

The confidential agent was greatly excited.

"It is all true," he said. "I have heard all about it before."

"Tell me the story."

"The young lady is the daughter of Sir Charles Wallingford, once the possessor of those vast revenues for which Mordaunt Clare steeped his soul in blood. Sir Charles married beneath him in the social scale, and got a beautiful but very poor wife."

"Then Minnie Wells is the real heiress of all this vast property?"

"If the certificate is genuine, as I have no doubt it is. I say Sir Charles was married, and it was generally believed that he was legally united to his lovely peasant bride, but when he suddenly died she was unable to produce a marriage certificate, or in any way establish her claim as a wife."

"I see."

"Everybody believed her story, and it was fully credited by everybody except the next heir.

"Naturally enough he succeeded to everything, and the widow could only rock her daughter in her arms and mourn her loss.

"Sir Guy was inclined to be kind to her, but she coldly rejected his offers of aid, and a year later was married to a former lover, this very Richard Wells."

"An interesting story," was Nick Carter's comment. "You say the widow, as she was generally thought to be, was unable to produce the certificate of her marriage?"

"Yes."

"She claimed to have had one?"

"Certainly.

"How did she explain its loss?"

"She declared it was lost; nothing more."

"What was the general opinion?"

"I lived in the neighborhood at that time, and remember that some folks suspected that it had been stolen by an agent in the pay of Sir Guy."

"Did you share that belief?"

"No. Sir Guy was too honorable for such an action."

"Well, it is explained now," said Nick. "But we must act quickly. If the man who murdered the three Wallingfords knows this, and if he also knows Minnie Wells, her life is in danger!"

"True, he would not hesitate to kill her, knowing that one document, if still in existence, could wrest the vast property from his hands."

The detective was more troubled about this matter than he had been about the others.

"Our best hope," he said, at length, "is in the belief that Clare does not know of the girl's existence, or that she is in the city."

"You forget that there is surely some connection between Clare and Percy Lang," suggested Stark, "and that Lang does know the girl."

"True!" cried Nick. "And I will get to work at once!"

* * * * * * *

It was not yet nine o'clock in the morning when a sharp ring at the basement bell of the house occupied by Percy Lang brought a slatternly scullion to the door.

There stood a dirty-looking man, with grimy hands and face.

He had a bag full of tools upon his shoulder. In his hand he carried one of those charcoal furnaces much used by plumbers.

"Well?" said the maid.

"I've been sent to fix the pipes in the house. There's been an order left at the shop."

"Are we busted?"

"The pipes are, I guess."

"Gracious, ain't you smart?"

"I can mend a broken pipe better than I can talk to a saucy girl."

"Oh, indeed, I don't think you can do anything very well," snapped the scullery maid, and after she had let him into the house she bounced away with a great deal of indignation.

The plumber laughed at her in a very discourteous style.

This made her still more angry with the ungallant fellow, and seeing him make a movement as though to come into the kitchen, she hastily slammed the door in his face.

"That gets rid of her," remarked the plumber, with what seemed to be a sigh of relief, "and I'm deuced glad of it, too, for those inquisitive girls are a thundering nuisance to have spying around when one has got business on."

The stove looked like the property of a plumber, the kit of tools was calculated to strengthen the idea, and the man's grimy appearance agreed well with the requirements of the trade, but the voice betrayed the fact that the man was Nick Carter, the detective.

With his tools still on his shoulder, the detective took his way slowly upstairs.

The smut and dirt with which he had covered his face were quite a sufficient disguise, and he felt no apprehension on the score of possible recognition in the event of meeting Percy Lang.

With a careless tread, Nick Carter went up to the second floor.

He did not care to tackle either of the parlors, believing that they would not repay his search.

He had an idea that the bedrooms would reward his labors.

He went into one, finding the apartment empty.

The luxurious furniture assured him that this was Lang's room.

A peep into the hallway satisfied him that he might pursue his search without fear.

"I don't think the murder was done by Percy Lang," he muttered, "because it was not in his style. Neither was it in the style of Mordaunt Clare. It is not likely that I shall find anything here that will throw any light on the death of Richard Wells, but it is impossible to say what else I may find."

He hunted carefully about the room.

Keys, which would open almost any lock, served to let him peep into all the various drawers and boxes in the bedroom.

Still he found nothing of any value to him, and was about to give up the search, when an old volume, well worn, and lying in the bottom of a deep drawer, chanced to meet his eye.

It was rather an odd place for a book, thought Nick Carter, and he picked it up, prompted more by curiosity than aught else.

He allowed the book to open, and it did so in a much-used portion of the volume, where the leaf was half turned down and some passages heavily marked.

With a bright flush on his face, Nick Carter read the passages.

A triumphant flash shone in his powerful eyes, and he slipped the book into his pocket with a low chuckle of exultation.

"At last! at last!" he muttered. "Now I know how those men were killed without a mark!"

CHAPTER VII.

CORNERING A RASCAL.

For ten minutes more Nick Carter continued to hunt around the room, in the hope of finding something else of value to him.

He took a book from among his tools, and compared it with several that lay in a closet.

They did not match in size.

Carefully concealing the book once more, Nick Carter picked up his kit of tools, and went into another bedroom on the floor.

This was more plainly furnished.

In addition to the ordinary furniture of a bedroom, it contained a neat writing desk.

The drawers of the desk were unlocked, and Nick Carter drew them open.

Some scraps of paper were lying within one of them.

The paper was scribbled over in very many repetitions of one name, done in different styles:

"J. Edward Simmons, Esq.
"J. E. Simmons, Esq.
"Joseph Edward Simmons, Esq."

A smile crossed the shrewd face of the detective.

"The same as the inside paper of the mask," he thought. "This Simmons evidently had a fortune in view, and amused himself by scribbling his name in a tony style and feasting his eyes upon it. Now for a boot hunt."

He found a pair of boots and a pair of shoes.

They matched the single boot he had brought along.

"Good!" ejaculated Nick Carter.

He was now assured that he was on the right track.

He heard a footstep in the hallway, and immediately made his way toward the marble basin that appeared in one corner of the bedroom.

A servant opened the door, and put in her head.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, a trifle suspiciously.

"Fixing the pipes."

"I didn't know that they wanted any fixing."

"Well, Mr. Simmons did."

"Oh! Mr. Simmons."

"Yes."

"Did he give the order?"

"Yes. But he's not the master of the house, is he?" asked Nick, in the most gossipy style possible, at the same time pretending to be examining the taps.

"Oh, no, he's not the master," returned the servant girl, quite ready for a bit of gossip. "The master's name is Lang, and he's a young man."

"Well, you don't call Mr. Simmons so very old, do you?"

"Oh, he's fifty, if he's a day."

"Let me see, is this his room?"

"Yes, this is Mr. Simmons' room."

"Well, for all you call him an old man," said Nick Carter, with a decidedly significant wink, "he's pretty young and gay in the matter of keeping late hours."

"Oh, dear, no, you're quite wrong," cried the servant girl. "He keeps very good hours."

"Do you mean to say that he went to bed early last night?"

The detective asked the question carelessly enough, and little did the girl dream with what amount of interest he awaited her reply.

"La, how did you know that he was out late last night?" she asked.

"Happened to be out myself and met him."

"Yes, he was out late, or early. I think it was two o'clock when he came in; but, then, it's a rare thing for him."

"What's his position here?" asked Nick, bending over the taps.

"Oh, he seems to be an old friend of Mr. Lang's, and sort of superintends the house for him."

"I thought so. Do you know if he is in the house?"

"I think so."

"I wish you would send him here to me. I didn't exactly understand his orders."

"Certainly," said the girl, and away she went dust brush in hand.

Nick smiled.

"Simmons is the man," he muttered, well satisfied with the result of his morning's work. "Aha, I'll have a very clever network woven about these rascals before long."

He shoved his bag of tools in a far corner, and took up his station by the side of the closed door.

He had not long to wait.

He heard a quick, heavy tread on the stairs, and also heard a man's voice saying:

"Who's been sending a plumber here, I should like to know? I've not ordered it."

Then the door opened.

In came Simmons with a very decided bounce.

Nick Carter, the instant his man was in the room, closed the door and put his back against it.

"What's all this——"

Simmons got just so far, and then, looking around for the plumber, discovered him standing with his back against the door.

There is something about the eye of a trained and experienced detective which never fails to strike terror to an old criminal's soul. It may be likened to the control of the lion-tamer over the wild beasts of the forest. Turn as they will, they cannot evade the eye of the master. So it was with Simmons.

He caught the gleam of that bright, powerful eye, and stood like some dumb statue before Nick Carter.

He could not note the dirty dress, he could not see the grimy, besmutted face, he could only gaze into those strong eyes, and tremble.

With a sarcastic smile upon his face, Nick said:

"Good-morning, sir. How shall I address you? Do you prefer to be called J. Edward Simmons, Esq., or Joseph Edward Simmons, Esq., or does your fancy favor the simpler combination of J. E. Simmons, Esq., or would you like me to tickle your ears with the melodious title of Sir J. Edward Simmons? Now, that is really tony. With

plenty of money, paid to you, say, for committing a crime, you ought to buy the title and realize your dream."

The man gazed at him in a sort of stupor, listening in amazement to the words that fell from his lips.

"Who are you?" he gasped, suddenly finding his tongue.

"A plumber."

"What do you want?"

"A pipe large enough to carry off Richard Wells' life-blood!"

Simmons started back, and his face turned a sickly white.

"You are a detective."

"And you are my prisoner!"

"Never!" cried Simmons.

With a sudden desperation that Nick Carter had not bargained for, the rascal drew a pistol and fired at the detective.

However, Nick was always on the lookout for danger.

The instant the barrel of the pistol appeared on a level with him, the detective dropped.

The bullet flew harmlessly over him and was imbedded in the door.

Like a huge tiger, the detective was upon his feet the instant that the report of the pistol rang out.

He fairly flew at Simmons, caught the pistol in a firm grasp, wrenched the weapon from his fingers, and then struck him a stunning blow between the eyes that knocked him as flat as the legendary pancake.

Then, with a violent shove of his foot, he rolled Simmons, who was senseless, under the bed, putting him out of sight.

Then, with the pistol in his hand, he turned toward the door.

Without doubt, the shot had been heard, and somebody would come to inquire into the matter.

Sure enough, the door was opened by two servants, a man and a young girl, when both cried out:

"Who's shot?"

"Nobody," said Nick. "I found this pistol under the marble basin, and was just looking at it when off it went."

With that, he put the pistol down on a small table, and the servants, satisfied with the explanation, went away.

Nick Carter pocketed the pistol, and then dragged Simmons out from under the bed.

The rascal was just recovering consciousness.

He realized his danger the instant his eyes were open again, and at once showed fight.

He grappled with the detective, and tried to throw him.

Nick laughed at him for a moment, and then tearing the fellow's hands away, he held him out at arm's length, and shook him until his teeth clashed together.

Then he released him, and gave him an open-handed slap that sent him across the room, just as a cuff from the paw of a bear might have done.

"Resist me, will you?" growled out the incensed detective. "Try to kill me, too, you murdering thief. Just make one more move, hound, and I'll bang your body against the walls until I break all your bones."

Thoroughly cowed, and realizing that he was less than a child in the hands of this man, Simmons did not attempt further resistance.

"What do you want?" he gasped.

"First, I want you, and, for that matter, I've got you. Next, I want some information, and you'll oblige me by furnishing it."

"Who are you? Your voice is very familiar, but I can't recognize your face."

"Now, on the other hand," remarked Nick Carter, "neither your clothing, your name, nor your more polished style of speech are at all familiar, but your face is as well known to me as it was ten years ago, when I nipped you as you came over the side of the vessel and sent you back to England to stand your trial!"

"Nick Carter!"

"Exactly, and you are Brummagem Bill, the English forger," confidently said the detective.

"What am I wanted for?"

"Oh, you know. Don't you know that Richard Wells died from the stab you gave him?"

"And you're taking me on that charge, Mr. Carter?"

"I am."

The fellow threw back his head and laughed loudly.

"Let me laugh, too," suggested the detective. "What is so funny?"

"Why, the idea of my making all this kick for nothing."

"Oh, you think it's nothing, then, do you?"

"Of course. I don't know of such a man as you mention. There are things I could be taken for, but this isn't one of them."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, indeed. You've probably got a shrewd suspicion of some kind in your head, and jumped at a conclusion, but this time, Mr. Carter, you're dead wrong."

"You think so, do you? You think I would have trouble in fixing this crime upon you?"

"Considering that I didn't do it, I should say you would."

"Well, well, what a mistake I have made, to be sure," said Nick. "But, perhaps, you know the party who made a mask out of the writing paper on which you had written your name in grand styles; perhaps you know the party who used a pair of your boots last night; perhaps you know the party who left the mask in the library at Richard Wells' house, and the boots in a corner of the hall when he fled from the side of his victim in his stocking feet! And, additionally, you may, perhaps, be able to tell me who wore your stockings that now lie in the closet yonder, completely covered and coated with mud and dirt from the street!"

Each clear accusation struck home with sledge-hammer force.

They knocked Mr. Simmons' insolence and indifference all to pieces.

The laugh died away upon his lips, and the vestige of color that had for the time being come into his cheeks now receded from them again.

He began to realize the strength of the circumstantial chain forged by the clear-brained detective.

"Of course, I am glad to know that I am mistaken," sneeringly went on Nick Carter, "and I am sure you will not hesitate to make known to me the name of the party who has been doing all this and getting you into trouble. Hold up your hands, you dog; if you resist, I'll crush your skull in!"

With the last sentence, his manner had suddenly changed.

Handcuffs in hand, he stood over his prisoner.

For an instant the desperate fellow seemed inclined to fight for his liberty, but the savage gleam in the eyes of the detective took all the fight out of him, and he held up his hands in submission.

Nick snapped the steel bracelets about Simmons' wrists.

"That settles you," he said. "Now let me show you how fully I know about your crime. I can even tell you what caused you to make that visit to Richard Wells' library. You went in search of the marriage certificate!"

"How in thunder do you know about that?"

He was so surprised that he could not keep back the question.

Nick Carter smiled.

"You quite admit your guilt," he said, and then Simmons gnawed his lip with rage.

"Well, it doesn't matter," resumed the detective. "I've got you dead, and you can't escape the issue. However, you can make me your friend or your foe, whichever you wish."

The fellow looked at him inquiringly.

"Who sent you on this job? Was it the master of this house, or his friend, Mordaunt Clare?"

"I can't answer the question."

"Oh! I see," exclaimed Nick. "You, too, in common with the rest of the hired ruffians employed by this man, are in fear of being murdered without a mark!"

Simmons said nothing.

Nick Carter began to believe that it was quite useless to try to overcome the superstitious terror which possessed the tool employed by the mysterious assassin.

"Answer me another question, and I'll repay you in some way," he said. "Tell me the address of Dr. Mario."

"I can't answer you."

Looking into the rascal's face, Nick could see that he was very far from being in a despairing mood.

"Aha, my cov!" he said, "you have got an idea that you're going to escape, probably by the aid of wealth. Don't let yourself be deceived. Only by death in your cell can you escape the hangman. As I have hunted you down, so will I hunt down your master and deliver him up to justice!"

Going to the open drawer of the desk, Nick took up several sheets of the paper on which Simmons, with visions of wealth before his eyes, had so stylishly written and rewritten his name.

These evidences of the man's guilt the detective put in his pocket.

Then the thief-taker picked up the boot he had brought with him, and put it in an outer pocket.

"In addition to these little things, to put in evidence," he said to his prisoner, "I have the mask you left in the library. Furthermore, it would be quite necessary for you to satisfactorily prove to a judge and jury where you were until two o'clock in the morning."

"You'll never hang me," blustered Simmons.

"Then you'll have to hang yourself, or get Lang to kill you off in his mysterious fashion," asserted the detective. "Stand up. Remember, I am an officer, and you are my prisoner. If you attempt to escape I shall either crack your skull or put a bullet through you. Walk by my side."

He started off, and Simmons went with him.

There was nobody in the hallway below, and their exit from the house was not noticed.

This fact put an idea into the wily detective's mind.

He walked Simmons a couple of blocks only, and then hailed a hack that was passing.

He ordered the driver to convey him to the hotel where Stark was staying, and then got in with his prisoner.

In a short time they were both standing in Stark's room.

The confidential agent was smoking his after-breakfast cigar.

Nick Carter put his prisoner in a corner, and then briefly outlined to Stark all that had occurred since their last meeting.

One thing only did he omit telling his friend. He said nothing about finding that old volume, whose pages, at the first glance, had caused him to cry out: "Now I know how those men were killed without a mark!"

Stark heard him with great interest, and considerable excitement.

"The rascals!" he said, in a low, intense tone. "They move swiftly, and do not halt at anything. I can easily conjecture that Mordaunt Clare, being in league with Percy Lang, got up the neat plot for his friend to wed Minnie Wells, and then obtain the immense fortune which rightfully belongs to her. Clare, presumably, is a married man, and was forced to bring his friend into the plot. The girl, upsetting their plans, forced them to the expedient of stealing the marriage certificate."

"You've got the correct idea of the matter, without doubt," assented the detective. "Now that success seems crowning our every effort, I feel like working without the loss of a moment. Now is the time for us to accomplish results."

"I agree with you. In fact, I begin to fear that our birds will begin to grow vastly alarmed at our good fortune and their persistent ill luck."

"And take wings?"

"Exactly."

"I have felt some alarm on that score, too. I propose now to bring them both dead to rights by finding the Italian doctor."

He approached the prisoner, Stark at his side.

"Simmons," he said, "have you any great love of life?"

The rascal eyed him suspiciously for a moment.

"Yes," he slowly said.

"You evidently have an idea that you will escape this charge."

"I have got such an idea," admitted Simmons.

"I thought so. You enjoy life while you live?"

"Yes, I do."

"Would you like to enjoy it for at least an hour longer?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I am in quest of a little information, and that if I don't get it I'm going to kill you, choke you to death right here and now, or else choke the information from your bloodless lips!"

Simmons grew deadly pale.

"What do you want to know?"

"I want to know the address of the Italian doctor."

"I don't know it."

The words had scarcely left his lips before the powerful detective had him by the throat.

He shut down upon Simmons with that awful grip which was known to the thieves as Nick Carter's "nippers."

Almost at once Simmons began to grow black in the face.

He struggled violently.

Nick Carter released him.

"You rascal, will you answer?"

Simmons gasped for breath.

"Great God! keep those fingers away from me."

"Then talk. What is the address of the Italian doctor?"

"I don't—— Wait."

For at the first words Nick had made a movement as though to take him by the throat again.

"Don't kill me for nothing," gasped the prisoner. "I know Dr. Mario, and saw him at the house yesterday, but if the words could save my life I could not tell you where he lives."

Nick saw that the man was speaking the truth.

"So he called upon Percy Lang, did he?"

"Yes, he called."

"For what purpose?"

"He wanted money."

"Ah! good. Did he get it?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I guess he wanted too much."

"Good again," cried Nick Carter, and Stark smiled with satisfaction. "How much did he ask?"

"I don't know."

"Be careful."

"Curse you, keep those fingers away from my throat. Do you suppose I'm going to lie to you any more? I don't know how much the doctor wanted because I didn't overhear that part of the conversation."

"Did they part in anger?"

"Yes."

"What is the nature of the service this Dr. Mario rendered Percy Lang?"

"I don't know."

"Very well, I'll not bother you with any more questions," said the detective, with sudden decision.

He took a key from his pocket and unlocked Simmons' handcuffs.

Then he placed him at a table, with paper, pen, and ink before him.

"Take up your pen," he said, "and write a note to Percy Lang, telling him to avoid trouble by calling upon the Italian doctor at once. Write it naturally, and let there be no sign of hidden trickery or smuggled information about it, or you'll have my fingers at your throat again, Mr. Brummagem Bill."

Very reluctantly the fellow picked up the pen and wrote the message that Nick Carter required.

When it was finished he handed it to the detective.

The latter scanned it with great care, and looked for a hidden meaning in every word.

However, it was so simply put together, and so briefly comprehensive of his orders, that he was satisfied to let it go to Percy Lang.

"Done with me?" asked Simmons.

"For a while," returned Nick Carter, and then he dexterously snapped the handcuffs upon Simmons' wrists again.

Turning to Stark he said:

"I'll leave this fellow in your care until I return to you again. Guard him well."

"Trust me for that," said Stark, and to Nick he whispered: "You are now going to reach the Italian doctor?"

"Yes."

"Pay him any price he names."

"I'll do it."

"Success to you."

Nick Carter walked out of the room.

He went to the nearest telegraph office, and there picked out a shrewd sort of a boy.

He hired the lad for an hour, and took him along with him.

He gave the boy some money for himself, and then placed in his hand the letter addressed to Percy Lang.

"I want you to deliver this letter at the address you see on it," he said. "Ring the bell, make them sign your book in the regular way, and if they ask you where the letter came from, or anything about it, say that it came to the office and you were sent out with it. Do you think you can do this thing right?"

"You bet."

"Then go," said the detective, and to himself Nick Carter muttered: "Now I shall soon stand face to face with the Italian doctor. What strange secret will my offer of a fortune bring forth?"

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ASTOUNDING REVELATION.

Dr. Italo Mario lived in one of the many large, old-fashioned houses still to be seen in Bond Street, where the hallways are as large as the average parlor of to-day.

There was no sign outside the door to announce the fact of the doctor's residence there, and so it must be assumed that he did not care for general patronage.

The doctor, attired in a loose gown and with a smoking-cap upon his head, was seated in the back parlor, a meanly furnished and rather gloomy room, puffing at a very large cigar.

A sharp ring at the bell caused him to get upon his feet.

The doctor kept no servants, so was forced to answer the ring himself.

He opened the door.

Percy Lang stood there.

"Walk in," said the doctor, and he held the door open until Lang had entered the hallway.

Then the doctor, as though he were in fear of being stabbed in the back, requested Lang to walk into the back room, following after his visitor with a watchful eye.

Lang entered the rear parlor and threw himself into a chair.

"Well?" inquiringly said Dr. Mario.

"I've called to see how reasonable you are to-day."

"I'm always reasonable."

"Ah, you looked like a madman to me yesterday."

"You thought so?"

"I did, indeed."

"Then to-day you will certainly think me hopelessly insane."

"Ah! Why?"

"Because I want more money than I asked for yesterday."

"What is your demand now?" asked Lang.

"I demand nothing. I ask for a loan."

"Don't split hairs," angrily rejoined Lang, an impatient frown on his face. "The amount?"

"I now wish to borrow the sum of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"Oh, you do?"

"Yes, I do."

The two men glared hard at one another.

"And if I refuse?" hoarsely demanded Lang.

"I shall wait a day."

"And then what?"

"Ask for an additional fifty thousand dollars. One day after that, if the money is not forthcoming, I shall make known the facts of your case."

For an instant the young man seemed inclined to leap upon the old doctor, presumably with the idea of taking him by the throat and ending the matter.

After a brief struggle, however, he mastered his passion and forced a hypocritical smile.

"Well," he said, "I will think over the matter, and give you my final answer to-morrow."

"At what time?"

"Noon."

"Very well."

"Good-day, doctor."

"Good-day, Mr. Percy Lang."

And then Lang walked away and let himself out of the house.

"I don't like his looks," muttered the doctor, with an anxious shake of his head, "and I'm sure he would have tackled me just now, had he thought himself my superior in strength."

Another ring at the door-bell put a sudden end to his soliloquy.

"He is bold enough to stab me as I open the door," muttered Dr. Mario, and after a brief search he found and carried with him to the door a stout walking cane, which he held as one would hold a cudgel.

To his relief, however, it was not Lang who stood at the door.

Plainly dressed, and with a mild and peaceful expression upon his face, Nick Carter looked at him.

"Dr. Mario, I believe."

"Yes."

"I wish to see you on business of great importance."

"Walk in."

"Thanks."

Dr. Mario admitted him to the hallway, and escorted him to the rear parlor, still looking at him as though he thought Nick might yet prove to be an assassin sent by Percy Lang.

"Be seated," said the doctor. "You say you have business with me?"

"Yes, and important, too."

"I am all attention," announced the doctor, puffing away at his huge cigar.

"My business is concerning two people. One of these two people is named Mordaunt Clare."

"Ah!"

"The other one," continued Nick Carter, "is known as Percy Lang, and he just left this house."

The doctor regarded him with a very crafty stare.

"Go on, sir."

"You have performed a very great service for these two men," went on the detective, "and either one or both could be much injured by a few words from you.

"Yesterday you called upon Percy Lang.

"You demanded a hundred thousand dollars as the price of your silence, or, if you did not put it in that form, it was clearly understood that you meant as much.

"Lang refused to pay you that amount of money, and you left him after some pretty high and bitter words.

"To-day he came to you, but he did not accede to your demands.

"He passed by me in the street, and I distinctly heard him swear to have you assassinated between now and to-morrow night!"

"Ah! the scoundrel," gasped the old doctor.

Then he turned to the detective.

"Who are you?"

"Johnson is as good a name as any other, especially when one carries this kind of cards," answered Nick Carter, drawing forth a thousand-dollar bank note and handing it to the doctor, who pounced upon it in the most greedy style.

"An excellent name," chuckled the old Italian, "a most excellent name and a very sensible card. Ha! ha!"

And he ran the crisp note through his fingers again and again.

"Well, sir," said the doctor, looking up from the bank note, "we will assume that your name is anything you please."

"Very good. I am the agent of a wealthy client. This client has put questions in my mouth, and I'll put them to you. Do you know such a man as Mordaunt Clare?"

"Yes."

"Good. Do you know where he is to be found?"

"I don't think it would be difficult for me to find him."

"Excellent! Now, doctor, I want to have a plain talk with you. As I have already told you, I am the agent of great wealth, and can afford to pay you handsomely for your information.

"Any reasonable sum, anything except such a fabulous amount as you demand from Percy Lang, I will engage to pay you in return for the information. That is one side of the proposition.

"On the other side you may look forward, very positively, to either a stab in the back or a bullet in the heart the next time you set foot in the street.

"Percy Lang fears you! He would willingly pay you even the sum you asked, were it not for his sensible fear that you would drain him of his fortune. He will have you killed, and there will end the matter."

"You talk very glibly about killing, but I am not the man to be easily killed," returned the doctor. "Come, to business! Why do you seek Mordaunt Clare?"

"He has many murders to answer for."

"Ah, but there are no proofs!" exclaimed the doctor, unguardedly.

Nick Carter caught at the words quick as a flash.

"How do you know that?" he asked, his powerful eyes fixed full upon the doctor.

The Italian shifted uneasily.

He could have bitten his tongue in two, so enraged was he at the slip it had made.

"Well," he said. "You claim that this Mordaunt Clare has committed some murders. You wish to take him for these alleged crimes?"

"Yes."

"To England?"

"Yes."

"And Percy Lang?"

"He, also, has murders to answer for. I want you to make plain his connection with Clare."

"I can do that."

"You can?"

"Yes."

"And will?"

"For a consideration."

"I will name fifty thousand dollars for answers to all my questions, and call your attention to the fact that the money is put against the knife or pistol of the assassins whom Percy Lang will at once put upon your track."

"What guarantee have I?" asked the doctor.

"My word! Look at me and tell me if I am trustworthy."

The doctor favored him with a very long stare.

"Yes," he said. "I think that I can trust to your word."

"Say, rather, that my word is better than the prospect of assassination, doctor. If you can make known the connection between Mordaunt Clare and Percy Lang I can save you from death, otherwise you are a doomed man!"

The doctor seemed to be somewhat affected by the intelligence.

He arose, ignited a hand lamp, and turned to Nick Carter.

"Come with me, Mr. Johnson, and I'll show you Mordaunt Clare."

With undisguised surprise Nick followed the Italian doctor.

"Was Mordaunt Clare an inmate of this house?"

The doctor, lamp in hand, led the way downstairs.

"Ah! I see," said Nick. "He is sick, and in bed."

"No, indeed," returned Dr. Italo Mario. "He was once a patient of mine, but I doubt that he ever will be again. No, we shall find him in my graveyard."

"He is dead?"

"No," with a short laugh, "he is not dead, but the Mordaunt Clare I shall show you is in my private graveyard."

With a broad grin upon his face as though the matter amused him greatly, the old doctor conducted the detective through a gloomy hallway, and paused before the door of the rear basement room.

With a key he unlocked the door, and threw it open.

The room was perfectly dark, the shutters being tightly closed.

"This is my graveyard," chuckled the old doctor. "Come in."

They entered the room.

By the light of the lamp, Nick Carter could see that it was fitted up on all sides with a number of small metal boxes.

These boxes rested upon shelves that were made deep and strong, were all painted black, and had plain white letters on them, running alphabetically.

"Let me see, A, B, C, here we have it," said the doctor, touching one of the boxes. "Please hold the light."

Nick did so.

"Did you ever see this man, Mordaunt Clare?"

"No."

"What a foolish answer," chuckled the doctor. "I could show you what I liked."

"I have seen his photograph."

"Ah, I see."

The doctor took a small key from his vest pocket, and opened the box marked "C."

"Hold up the light. That's it. Now we have it. Mordaunt Clare number one, and Mordaunt Clare number two."

He took two masks from the tin box.

They were made of plaster, and had evidently been formed on a human being's face.

There was a paper attached to each mask.

Dr. Mario held up one before Nick Carter's eyes.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"Mordaunt Clare," cried the detective. "I can recognize every feature in the profile. Yes, there are the arched eyebrows, the high, thin nose, as sharp as a knife blade, the projecting upper lip, and the much receding chin. Yes, that is cast from the face of Mordaunt Clare."

"Yes, you are right. That plaster cast was taken from the face of Mordaunt Clare. I call it Mordaunt Clare number one."

"That is odd."

"Not at all."

"Are there two Mordaunt Clares?" the detective asked.

The doctor chuckled gleefully.

"Not exactly, but I have number two, nevertheless, and here it is, Mr. Johnson."

He held up the other plaster mask in the full light of the lamp.

One glance at it was enough for Nick Carter.

"Percy Lang!" he exclaimed.

"Exactly."

"Then why do you call them Mordaunt Clare number one and Mordaunt Clare number two?"

"Because it would not be right to call it Percy Lang."

"Why not?"

"There is no Percy Lang."

"What?"

"I am telling you the plain, sober truth," said the doctor, with a quiet chuckle. "Lang is a myth."

"Who, then, is the man I know as Percy Lang?"

"He is Mordaunt Clare!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE TELLTALE MARK.

Nick Carter's astonishment was complete.

It almost took his breath away when he comprehended the import of the doctor's words.

"Percy Lang and Mordaunt Clare one and the same man?"

"Yes," nodded the doctor.

"How can that be? Much as they resemble one another, there are yet such wide differences in their features——"

The Italian doctor broke in again with his peculiar chuckle.

"Say no more here. I have a long story to tell. Come upstairs, and I'll tell it. Carry the light, and I'll carry the masks."

In more of a dream than he had been for many a day, Nick led the way upstairs, carrying the lamp in his hand.

When they had reached the back parlor again, Dr. Mario blew out the lamp and took it from Nick Carter's hand.

Then he set the plaster masks down on a small table, and turned to the detective:

"Some years ago," he began, "I was in England on a visit.

"There I met with Mordaunt Clare, the original of these casts.

"He was at college, and his extra smartness in chemistry caused me to take an interest in the young man.

"He was, decidedly, one of the very best chemists I had met.

"I knew something of chemistry, and more about surgery and poisons!

"We became quite intimate, spending more than one evening together.

"He gave me many points in deep chemistry, and I returned it with information on the subject of both mineral and vegetable poisons.

"He was experimenting day after day and night after night trying to find a vegetable poison that would destroy life without leaving a mark!

"One day he communicated this idea of his to me, and I delighted his heart by presenting him with a volume, old and worn, written on parchment, which gave the formula for preparing just the article he sought.

"With his knowledge of chemistry, following the directions of the ancient volume, he was enabled to compound a purely vegetable poison which would kill instantly and leave no trace for the eye of the most skillful and suspicious examiner.

"When he had mastered the meaning of the formula, and knew that he now had it in his power to make a poison, one drop of which would kill, without a mark to show the action, he turned to me and said:

"'Doctor, this places a fortune fit for a king in my grasp!'

"I questioned him closely. He made no direct replies, but let me clearly understand that but three lives stood between him and the great fortune of the Wallingfords.

"I knew then that he intended to murder them. I told him the nature of my business in New York, and solicited his patronage.

"He decided to avail himself of my services.

"I returned to New York about one year later.

"I had not been here long when he came to me, and placed himself in my hands as a patient.

"Do you know what he wanted me to do? He wanted me to make for him what I have made for more than a hundred great rascals who walk the streets to-day unknown, but who, if they could only be identified, would either be cast into prison or else strung up by the hangman. He wanted me to make for him a living mask!"

He paused, and picked up the plaster cast marked "Mordaunt Clare, number one."

Nick Carter almost shivered as he began to realize the real character of the Italian doctor's terrible trade.

"Sir," said Dr. Mario, "observe the arched eyebrows, the high nose, very thin, the retreating chin, etc.

"I had to change all this. I drugged my patient, seized my knife and went to work.

"I cut the skin under the eyes to the nostril, making a single straight cut from under the gland to the nose and one underneath, meeting it along the base of the nose from the point.

"I drew back the skin from the bridge, and then slashed away at the nose.

"I cut bone, muscle and all down to a level with the line of the face, and drew the flap of the skin back, thus, you see, making it meet the line of the skin of the cheek. You understand?"

"You are making me understand," said Nick, in reply, intensely interested in the doctor's description.

"That ends the nose," continued the doctor, who had been warming up with his subject, and who now took off his dressing-gown. "The eyebrows claimed attention next.

"Just look at them. Any lady in the land would have been proud of them, they were so prettily and perfectly arched. A few cuts changed all that.

"I moved a piece of skin and muscle from each temple, and when the wounds healed they contracted, and drew the eyebrows upward.

"Then I had to look at his upper lip and chin. I chopped away some of his upper teeth, and sent his upper lip in. Then I removed some of the lower ones, and put large false ones in their place, the whole giving the effect of a protruding chin.

"Well, he was sixty days under my hands, and was not in danger at any time. The first time he looked in a mirror he came very near fainting.

"It was a great operation, one of the best I have ever done. This other mask, called Mordaunt Clare number two, was taken after he had fully recovered."

"Astonishing!" muttered Nick. "And so this man Percy Lang is none other than Mordaunt Clare. Why did he undergo this operation, which, to say the least, must have been quite painful?"

"He wanted to sink his identity."

"I see. He was apprehensive that suspicion would fall upon him, even though he had murdered his victims without a mark."

"Exactly. The new face made the matter of identification impossible."

"But with the two masks, and with the details of the story in my possession, the case is complete."

"You are wrong," quickly returned the doctor. "Without me to explain the whole affair, you would fail to identify your man, and neither judge nor jury would credit your story. Ah, sir, this is a remarkable case. Millions, millions are at stake, and my fee should be something very handsome."

The doctor's hands were covered with the dust that

had rubbed off from the boxes he had handled in his "graveyard."

He rolled up his sleeves and went across the room to where a basin of water stood.

"Yes, Mr. Johnson," he said, rubbing the cake of soap between his palms, and plunging his hands deep into the basin, "inasmuch as it's wholly my evidence that can establish these facts and down Mordaunt Clare, I think I ought to receive much more than the price you name."

Thinking deeply, Nick Carter had been regarding the doctor somewhat carelessly, but as the old Italian now turned toward him, wiping his hands on a towel, the detective caught sight of a mark, tattoed into the left wrist.

It was a well-executed fan.

The instant Nick's eyes fell upon it, the doctor turned down his sleeve, and the mark was hidden from view.

But Nick Carter had seen enough.

He took a small notebook from his pocket, and ran his eye over page after page.

"So, doctor," he said, "you think the sum I have named is not enough for your services?"

"No, I do not."

"Well, I will add to it."

"Ah! good!"

"Not in money, however."

"How then?"

"I shall make you a present, my dear doctor," said Nick Carter, closing the book and putting it away in his pocket.

"That's odd."

"Not at all. Of course the present will be of great value."

"Oh, well," observed the doctor, "what matters it. If the present is of great value it will be just as good as money."

"You will think more of it than you will of money."

"Impossible."

"You are wrong. In fact, so valuable is this present that I withdraw my promise of cash and will not pay you any money at all. Yet, if I were to offer you a million in exchange for this present of which I speak, you would reject the offer at once!"

The doctor looked at his visitor in a searching manner, much as though he had doubts about Nick's sanity.

"What, a present worth more than a million?"

"I have said it."

"What can it be?"

"Your life!"

The doctor stared at him.

"Would you murder me?"

"No, indeed. You totally mistake my meaning. When I say that I would make you a present of your life, I mean that I would save you from the electric chair."

The doctor grew deadly pale, and glared searchingly at his strong-eyed visitor.

"You rave!" he asserted.

"Listen to a little story that I have to tell," quietly returned Nick Carter, "and then tell me if I rave.

"Ten years ago several children, about a dozen in all, were mysteriously abducted from their homes in this city.

"They were all the children of poor people, and the police were at a loss to account for the reason of their abduction.

"Months after these children were found by mere accident. Some were alive, some dead, and the faces of all were hacked and carved in the most horrible fashion.

"They were found in the house of a doctor. There they had been prisoners, and at his mercy.

"Two of the little children died after they were rescued. Two had been found dead. The rest were more or less disfigured, and their countenances unaccountably changed.

"The doctor was arrested, and thrown into jail. By means of a bribe and the faithlessness of a keeper, he made his escape.

"I saw that man. I noted the mark of a fan done in ink upon his upper wrist, and also jotted down his whole appearance.

"Dr. Florentine, do you think I know you?"

He was on his feet now, his blazing eyes fixed upon the blanched face of the man opposite him.

"Who are you?" gasped the doctor.

"Nick Carter, the detective."

The old Italian plunged his hand into a side pocket, and leaped to his feet.

Nick caught the flash of a bright pistol barrel.

He leaped upon the doctor, with one of his tigerish bounds, and caught the pistol by the barrel.

Turning the muzzle away from him he gave the doctor's wrist a violent wrench.

The pistol was torn from the Italian's grasp.

Nick opened his left hand, and gave his opponent a slap on the side of the head.

It knocked the doctor over the chair on which he had lately been sitting, and landed him upon the floor in a very confused state.

Nick put the pistol in his pocket, and then turned to the doctor.

"Got enough?" demanded Nick.

"Yes!" was the breathless reply.

"You yield?"

"Yes."

"That's sensible. You see that I know you, Dr. Florentine. You stole those children and kept them prisoners in your house, while, in order to become an expert at your abominable trade, you practiced with your knife upon their poor little faces, and so learned how to make living masks. You are a fugitive from justice, and as such I arrest you. You murdered those innocent children, and your life belongs to justice!"

The doctor shivered.

"Do you want to save yourself from death?" asked Nick.

"Yes."

"Then you must make a clean breast of all you know concerning this Mordaunt Clare, and be prepared to back up your testimony when placed on the witness stand."

"I am ready to do all this," said the doctor, submissively. "In return, do you promise that you will not let them kill me?"

"I do. I will save you."

"Then I am at your command."

"Pick up the masks, wrap them up very carefully. I am going to have some sworn statements made this afternoon. Percy Lang no longer exists, and to-day winds up the criminal career of Mordaunt Clare!"

CHAPTER X.

THE CHAIN COMPLETE.

Ten minutes later the doctor and the detective issued from the house in Bond Street.

Under his arm the doctor carried a tin box, in which, carefully wrapped in wool, lay the important plaster casts.

Nick Carter, constantly on the alert for danger, at once noted the fact that four men, who had been lounging about near at hand, all started off after him and the doctor.

"Do you see those men?" he asked the Italian.

"I noticed some men near the door, but paid no particular attention to them."

"They are four assassins, ready to 'do' you the moment I leave you alone."

The doctor got closer to the detective's side.

They turned the corner.

There they halted.

Nobody was passing at the time.

Nick Carter drew a revolver and held it in his hand.

Around the corner came the four men, now close together.

"Halt!"

Nick's voice rang out upon the air like a trumpet.

His revolver was covering them, and the astonished rascals came to an abrupt stop.

"Get!"

That was all Nick Carter said.

The rascals turned on their heels and slouched away.

Nick Carter put up his pistol.

"Come on," he said. "That will put an end to them for the present, my dear doctor, but it also very clearly shows you your danger.

"Mordaunt Clare has made up his mind to have you killed.

"You have it in your power to throw him into a cell, from which he will not be free until the day of his hanging.

"You must either do this, and do it in a thorough and effectual manner, or he may manage to get clear upon the charges.

"Should he do so, you know in advance what your fate will be.

"Some day you would either be found dead in the street, or else neatly murdered in your house. He has wealth to back him, and if you don't down him, he'll down you."

A resolute expression crossed the Italian doctor's face.

"You have promised me my life, have you not?" he asked.

"Yes, and I'll keep my word."

"Then I'll tell all I know about Mordaunt Clare, and that will be enough to hang him."

The detective smiled.

"You didn't tell me the whole truth, I was sure."

"I admit it."

"What else do you know?"

"That he murdered Morgan, who was my servant."

"Oh, how do you know it?"

"I saw him go to the prison."

"How big is the bottle he uses for the poison?"

"Less than an inch long, and holds no more than half a teaspoonful of liquid."

"I see. He could easily conceal it in the palm of his hand."

"Exactly. He always carries one of those bottles in his vest pocket, in readiness to use the poison if he wishes."

"Do you know Simmons?"

"Brummagem Bill?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he knows anything about the murders there?"

"The old baronet, and his brother and son?"

"Yes."

"Certainly. I am positive that Brummagem Bill assisted in all those murders."

"Good enough!"

In a short time Nick ushered his prisoner into the room where Stark sat, keeping Brummagem Bill, or, as we have known him, Simmons, company.

"Sit down, my dear doctor," politely said Nick.

But the doctor didn't sit down.

He stared at Simmons, noting the handcuffs upon the man's wrists, and Simmons, equally surprised, stared at him.

"So they've collared you, have they?" the doctor asked.

"Yes. And you?"

"I'm collared, too, but then it's only a temporary matter with me. I have only to tell all I know about Clare and that settles it."

"Well, I don't 'funk' very easily," said Simmons, "but if I can save my neck, I'll turn State's evidence and tell all I know."

"It's the only way," promptly said the detective. "You two men have either got to down Mordaunt Clare, or else your doom is sealed!"

He unlocked Simmons' handcuffs again.

Then he placed him at the table on which lay the writing materials.

"Your last letter went well," he said, with a satisfied smile. "Now write me another."

Thoroughly submissive, Simmons picked up a pen.

"Tell him that if he will come to you at once you can show him the way to get rid of the doctor. Say that you are in company with a man that can do the job, and that the terms are so high that you hesitate about making a bargain. Do you think that will bring him to you?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he will suspect any trap?"

"No, not if the other letter didn't excite suspicion."

The letter was written.

Nick Carter examined it.

"Correct," he said. "Address it."

While this was being done he touched the electric button in the room, and up came a servant.

Nick Carter gave him a card and slipped some money into his hand.

Then he gave him the note addressed to Lang.

"In about ten minutes' time we shall begin business," he said to Stark, standing with his back to the door, and with one hand on a weapon. "Now please give me your attention, and I'll tell you all about the doctor."

He then, briefly but clearly, recounted to Stark all that had taken place at the doctor's house.

"Wonderful!" ejaculated the confidential agent. "No

wonder we failed to recognize Mordaunt Clare in Percy Lang."

"And the rest of it is," smilingly said Nick, "that I don't have to pay the old doctor the immense sum that otherwise would have been necessary to purchase his testimony."

"But wait," sternly said Stark. "There is one thing about this business that I don't like."

"What is it?"

"You say that this fiendish doctor murdered those innocent children while practicing his diabolical act."

"Yes, I'm sure he did."

"That man deserves to be terribly punished for his crimes."

"He shall be."

"But you have promised him his life in return for his services. I do not like to win this battle and know that such a scoundrel escapes the justice he merits."

Nick Carter placed his finger alongside his nose.

"I'm no fool," he said. "My promise is an empty one. When he was taken, years ago, it was well known that he could not be convicted of the murders. However, there are four indictments against him, and although he can't be hung, there'll be no difficulty in procuring him forty years in prison, and I'll do it when I'm through with him."

"So, as a matter of fact, your promise was an empty one?"

"Exactly. I merely played upon the man's terror in order to attain my ends."

"Good enough," said Stark.

A short time after a rap came at the door.

Nick Carter opened it.

There stood a gentleman with a roll of legal cap paper in his hand.

"You are the notary public I sent for?" asked Nick.

"Yes."

"Come in."

The notary did so, and arranged his paper, pens and ink upon the center table.

"Doctor," said Nick, "we will begin with you, if you like. Remember, I have promised you your life."

"I remember."

"Then dictate your statement to this gentleman, detailing everything you know concerning Mordaunt Clare that is of a criminating nature."

"I will."

And the doctor began his statement in a clear, concise manner.

Nick Carter still stood on guard.

"Here is the very book given to Clare by the doctor," he whispered to Stark, showing the volume he had found that morning. "I took it out of the rascal's bureau drawer."

"It contains the formula for the vegetable poison which kills without leaving a trace?"

"Yes."

"Well," decidedly said Stark, "I think we'll have no trouble whatever in hanging our man."

"None at all," said Nick. "The case against him will be complete. I hope he does not come until my deposition is made, so that they can all be read to him."

"The battle is won!" positively asserted the confidential agent.

In a short time two gentlemen, in plain, neat clothing, came in, and nodded familiarly to Nick.

"Glad to see you, boys," said the detective. "Just take your seats by the door, and see that nobody leaves without my permission."

The two men were detectives, sent from the central office.

They sat down by the door, and Nick Carter was at liberty.

He glanced over the statement the doctor had just concluded.

The value of the statement existed in the proof that Percy Lang was in reality Mordaunt Clare, and that he had been known to administer poison to the servant, Morgan.

The doctor was taken into the next room by the notary, and there signed the statement.

"Now," said Nick Carter, when they had returned, "we have done with the doctor for a little time. Doctor, please take your seat."

"I can't go yet?"

"Not just yet."

The doctor sat down.

Nick Carter turned to Simmons.

"Well, my man," he said, "have you made up your mind to hang your master, and thus make the law a trifle more friendly to yourself?"

"Yes."

"Good. What can you tell?"

"Much, direct and indirect. He told me long ago about killing the three men in England.

"In this city, I know that he murdered Charles Deems, in order to get him out of the way, so that he himself might marry Miss Wells.

"He was going to have the job done by hire, but after I had secured the men to do the work he concluded to do it himself.

"Then he murdered Morgan, the man who died in the cell at the police station. I saw him write the order, signing Mr. Carter's name to it. I saw him disguise himself and start out, and when he came back he told me that the job was done."

"I guess we've got about enough to hang six men," said Nick Carter. "Make your statement to this gentleman, and leaving nothing out which can convict Mordaunt Clare."

CHAPTER XI.

CONCLUSION.

Simmons had just completed and signed his statement, and Nick Carter was making his own to the notary, when a tap sounded at the door.

Nick nodded to the officers stationed there, and they quietly opened the door.

In walked Mordaunt Clare, the man the reader has known all along as Percy Lang.

The instant that he was fairly in the room, the shrewd officers closed and locked the door.

The newcomer looked about him, saw the man he expected to see, it is true, but so many more that he did not expect to see that he was puzzled.

All the nerve was not taken out of the rascal.

He returned the gaze of the detective in the coolest possible style.

"Are you addressing me?" he asked, very naturally.

"I am, Mr. Clare."

"My name is not Clare."

"Indeed, what is it?"

"Lang."

"What was it when this cast was taken from your face?" demanded Nick Carter, and opening the tin box he took out of it one of the masks.

It was the first one that the doctor had taken.

Some of Clare's impudence deserted him when he saw the cast.

"Don't say anything, my dear Clare, but listen to this," smilingly observed the detective, and taking up the doctor's statement, he read it from beginning to end.

Mordaunt Clare sat down and eyed the doctor fiercely.

"So you make that statement, do you?" he said.

"Yes, why shouldn't I? You have millions, and I made you. Yet you denied me thousands."

Clare turned to Nick Carter.

"Well, sir," he said, "I do not wish to contradict this lunatic. We will allow that he is correct. Suppose I am Mordaunt Clare, of what crime are you going to convict me?"

"Of murder," answered Nick. "We must not bother ourselves about the murders in England, because it will be much easier to convict you of those you committed in New York.

"You have killed here, to our certain knowledge, Charles Deems and Jeremiah Morgan, and were the instigator of Mr. Wells' murder. If you will listen to this, you will understand the nature of the proofs."

He picked up Simmons' statement and read it through.

"Well, that's pretty strong," admitted Clare. "That is to say, it is good, hard swearing."

"It is strong enough to hang you."

"I think not. A jury would surely laugh at you, and the doctors that my counsel would produce would prove that nobody can be poisoned without leaving some mark."

"Not if this was produced and the formula tried on a cat or dog in court?"

As he uttered the words, Nick Carter held up the worn volume on poisons that he had that morning taken from the murderer's drawer.

The instant that Mordaunt Clare saw the volume, he seemed to lose his nerve.

He hissed out a bitter curse, and made a spring toward it.

The hand containing it glided behind Nick's back, and the other came forward, holding a cocked revolver.

"Halt!"

The command was imperative; the weapon was leveled straight at his heart.

Clare halted.

One instant he hesitated, and then he dropped back in his seat.

"I'm a goner," he said. "You have spun a clever web about me and I can't escape."

"You confess that you committed these crimes with which you now stand charged?" asked Nick.

"Yes, I do, and I realize that even my enormous wealth cannot save me. The money will naturally revert to the British crown."

"So the crown thinks?"

"I can make your fortune if you will make terms with me. I can and will put in your way the possession of my vast possessions if you will grant me my freedom. It can be done with a few strokes of the pen."

"You are very humble, but your humility comes too late," smilingly observed Nick Carter. "Permit me to inform you that I am perfectly aware of the fact that at your death everything will come to Miss Minnie Wells, the legitimate daughter of Sir Charles Wallingford, and the rightful owner of the vast estates. The marriage certificate is now in my possession, and you are virtually a beggar. So you see, Mr. Mordaunt Clare, you can make no sort of a bargain with me."

He turned to the men he had placed near the door.

"Officers, arrest and handcuff that man."

As the officers advanced toward Mordaunt Clare, the latter leaped to his feet.

In his hand gleamed a small, exquisitely-made revolver.

Ten feet distant from him were the doctor and Simmons.

They were seated in chairs, close together.

With a rapid movement, Clare presented his revolver.

It was self-acting.

Twice in succession he pressed the trigger.

Two reports rang out.

The doctor and Simmons fell back in their chairs, shot through the heart.

The officer made a rush at the desperate man.

Too late.

Once again his forefinger pressed the trigger.

This time, however, the muzzle of the weapon was turned against his right temple.

With the third report, Mordaunt Clare, the blood-stained murderer, fell to the floor with a bullet in his brain.

* * * * * * *

But little more remains to be told.

A few months later, when the confidential agent returned to England, Mrs. Wells and her daughter Minnie, the heiress of the enormous Wallingford possessions, went with him.

The certificate, added to many sworn statements, put the young lady in possession of her rights, and although it was not the conclusion that the confidential agent had looked forward to when he started on his mission, he was pretty well satisfied with the result.

Nick Carter received a handsome check for his skillful work, and he always maintains that one of the most mysterious cases he was ever engaged on was that wherein men were "murdered without a mark!"

THE END.

That was a most extraordinary case where a rich man was kidnaped in order to affect the stock market. The gang concerned in it was clever, but Nick Carter was cleverer still. The adventures he became involved in were some of the most perilous he had ever experienced. Tambourine Jack was a puzzle to all concerned except the great detective. The story of this strange character is thrillingly narrated in the next issue, "Nick Carter's Night Watch; or, Working in the Dark."

STORIES OF MYSTERY.

A new contest begins this week.
The last one was far and away the best we have ever had.
Now, boys, let's all get together and see what we can do to make this one a record breaker.
You have shown that you have lots of ability. Now, see, how you can improve.
For full particulars, see page 31.
The list of prize winners in the last contest will be published in three weeks.

Back to Sing Sing.

(By Harry Shook, Milbank, South Dakota.)

It was in the city of Kingston, N. Y., one dark night in May, when two men might have been seen crouching in a dark back alley in the most deserted part of the city. The night was intensely dark, and the men had little fear of detection. They were rough men, both heavily built. Their names were Dan Derr and Phil Martin, the former being a noted crook who had just served out his second term in Sing Sing, and the latter being a faithful confederate.

But what was their mission on this dark night, crouched there in that dark alley, so silent and vigilant? Let us listen to their conversation, and perhaps we will then understand.

"Why in thunder don't he come, Phil? I've never known Bill to fail me before."

The speaker was Dan Derr, and he spoke very impatiently.

"Something must have happened to him, Dan," said Phil Martin, "because I don't think Bill would play truant——. Why, what in thunder is it, Dan?" for his companion had thrown himself flat upon the ground and had flung up a warning hand. Accordingly, Phil remained silent and listened.

"Footsteps," muttered Dan, as he arose and resumed his former crouching position. "Curse it, we're in a nice fix, Phil," he whispered. "We don't know whether it's Bill or the millionaire."

"It's the old cuss all right, and don't you forget it," said a low voice behind them, and their pal, Bill Mallet, crept up to them.

"Curse you, what kept you so long, Bill? We've been waiting nearly an hour." And Dan Derr ground his teeth savagely and then fell to questioning again.

"Where is the old cuss?" he asked.

"Almost here," came the reply, and the men crouched low and awaited the coming of the millionaire.

At last their prey came in sight, walking slowly through the inky darkness of the night. And this man was William Bernleigh, the banker, famous throughout the city, being known as the "Millionaire."

But let us return to about an hour previous to the above incident. As the crooks lay waiting for the millionaire, they were all unconscious of the fact that a man lay very near them, listening eagerly to every word that passed between them. He had followed the crooks for more than two days, and it was he that had twice sent Dan Derr to Sing Sing.

Hearing of the convict's release, the listener, who was no other than Roy Delmar, the detective, determined to watch him, believing it would not be long before the released convict would be up to some new game.

The detective listened for about fifteen minutes and then stole away. Now he knew from the conversation he had overheard that the crooks were going to harm the millionaire, and being a friend of the latter, resolved to warn him if it was not too late. So he hurried up the street and through the city. At length he arrived at his friend's house. He rang the bell and inquired of the servant who opened the door, "Is Mr. Bernleigh at home?"

"Yes," replied the servant, "he is just getting ready to go out. This way, please," and the detective was ushered into the parlor.

"Why, Delmar, where did you come from?" cried a voice, and turning, the detective saw the banker coming toward him.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Bernleigh," said the detective, ignoring the banker's question regarding his former whereabouts. "I wish you to do me a favor, sir," added Delmar.

"Do you a favor, Mr. Delmar? Why certainly, if I can."

"Will you help me?" asked Delmar.

"Yes," replied the banker. Then he asked: "What is it you wish me to do? I shall have to take a walk in a few minutes and we can talk while we walk."

"You'll not go, Mr. Bernleigh," said the detective, looking strangely into the banker's eyes.

"Why, what do you mean, Delmar?" asked the puzzled banker.

"Just this. I am going in your place."

"Oh, yes, now I understand. But why do you do this?"

"Never mind why, but get out of those clothes, quick."

The surprised banker complied, and soon Roy Delmar looked amazingly like the banker. Then the detective left the house. And a smile flitted across his face as he beheld a dark form emerge from behind a clump of bushes and start rapidly away in the direction taken by himself. This man he knew to be the pal of Dan Derr and Phil Martin. As the detective was passing the hiding place of the crooks, he held his breath and waited. Suddenly he was seized from behind, and a handkerchief saturated with chloroform was held tightly against his nose. After a few moments it was removed, and the detective, who had not drawn a breath while the handkerchief was pressed again his nose, was as conscious as ever.

"Grab him now, boys, quick," said Dan Derr, "and carry him down to the dugout. Lively, now."

They carried Delmar to the outskirts of the city, around a mountain, down a cliff and under a waterfall. And then the detective, who had meanwhile feigned unconsciousness, was borne into a large cave. There he was thrown down into a bunch of straw in a dark corner of the cave, while his captors, who had neglected to bind and disarm him, went to the other end of the cave to talk it over. Suddenly Dan Derr sprang to his feet and cried: "Blame it all, boys, you'll have to watch the prisoner while I run back to the alley. I left that nose-rag there and I'm pretty sure it's not going to stay there to give that demon of a detective, Delmar, a clew. Why, he's almost as bad as Nick Carter, and it won't do at all to leave that rag there. Watch the prisoner now," and he was off.

"This is just the time, and I'm pretty sure it couldn't be a better one," thought the detective, and he arose noiselessly and crept nearer the two crooks. He crept nearer and nearer, and at last glided into a kind of doorway in the wall of the cave and took off his disguise. Then he waited. Presently Dan returned.

"Find the rag?" asked Phil Martin.

"Yes, but did you bind that banker yet?"

"No," was the answer.

"Curse you, fellows, have you lost your head?" he stormed furiously, and went over to the place where they had put the prisoner.

"He's gone!" he yelled, and then the other two men started to the other end of the cave.

"Quick, there, look sharp now, and don't you let him get away." And they dashed toward the mouth of the cave.

"Halt there, or I'll fill you full of lead," called a stern voice, and, a revolver in either hand, the young detective stepped boldly out in front of the racing crooks, who recoiled instantly.

"It's Delmar!" they cried, as their hands went toward their hips. "Hands up, there, or you're dead men!" And the men, seeing it was useless to resist, complied. The detective then handcuffed them and marched them off to the lockup.

Some time later, Roy Delmar had the satisfaction of accompanying the three crooks back to Sing Sing.

Two Boy Detectives in Mexico.

(By Clement G. Yates, Milford, Conn.)

On November 3, 18—, two boys were walking in the City of Mexico. They were Arthur Jones and Gus Crown, two amateur detectives. They were returning to their hotel, when Arthur saw a man on the other side of the street, whom he recognized as John Curtis, a noted bank-breaker, who had operated all through New York and New England, and who had recently escaped from Sing Sing. He immediately told Gus, and they at once began shadowing him. He led them to a house in a tough part of the city, where he let himself in with a key, which Gus saw was exactly like the key to his room. So after waiting about a minute so that Curtis could get out of the way, they unlocked the door and Gus stepped on the sill, when he heard a sharp click, and as Arthur caught him by the shoulder and pulled him back, the board at the top of the door slid to one side and a huge sword blade came down, and would have killed Gus had not Arthur heard the click of the spring and pulled him out of the way. In a minute it all slid back into place again. They then crept into the hall, closed the door and locked it. They heard some one talking in a room just off the hall. They crept to the keyhole. They could only hear a few words of the conversation, but from what they heard they found that Curtis and Nordaunt, the man with whom he was talking, intended to rob a wealthy Mexican named Miguel Stoteldo, who was to receive a large sum of money for a ranch. The man who was going to buy it was to reach town on the afternoon of Saturday, the seventh, and so the money would have to be kept in Stoteldo's house until the bank opened Monday morning.

Just then Curtis arose to go and Arthur and Gus had to run upstairs to get out of sight. Gus stumbled over a chair in the dark and made a noise.

"What is that?" said Curtis, who was alarmed and was afraid that some one had been spying on them.

"It's only the cat," said Mordaunt. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty."

"Pur-r-r, meow," answered Gus.

This seemed to satisfy them, for Curtis left and Mordaunt went back to his room and shut the door.

The two boys then left the house as noiselessly as they possibly could and went to Señor Stoteldo's house and told him what they had heard.

On Saturday night Curtis and Mordaunt broke into Señor Stoteldo's house and were captured by two policemen who were there ready to receive them.

A few days later Señor Stoteldo sent each of the boys a check for $100 for the work they had done.

Finding the Banker's Millions.

(By Alvy May, Scottdale, Pa.)

About nine o'clock one morning a man walked hurriedly up the steps of a house and rang the bell. He was a tall, dyspeptic-looking person of about forty years, with hair parted in the middle and sleeked down over his forehead. The door was soon opened by a bright-looking lad, who took his card. He was soon shown into a room, where sat a man of about thirty years writing at a desk.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Brown; be seated," said Sam West, the great detective, for it was he.

"I am a partner in the private firm of Brown & Cope. This morning when my clerks arrived at the office they found the vault door open and three million dollars in bonds missing. The firm, although old, is not as rich as is generally supposed. In short, I confess to you that I am hopelessly ruined if this money is not recovered," said Mr. Brown.

"It shall be recovered if I can do it," said Sam.

"Who knew the combination?"

"I alone knew it."

After a little further conversation the detective left the house with Mr. Brown. After searching the vault and not finding any clew, Sam questioned the officer that was on the beat. The officer told him that about one o'clock a cab had driven away from the bank and that the cabman's name was Tim Scully, and he gave Sam his address. Sam went to the cabman's house only to find that

he was a hard drinker and had fallen dead of apoplexy while unharnessing his horse after coming from his nightly rounds, for he ran a "night-hawk" cab and took his sleep during the day. But the great detective was not to be fooled so easy. He hired the horse and cab and drove to the front of the bank about the same time as it was there the other night, and started it in the same direction the policemen had seen it go. The horse settled right down into a swinging trot and jogged along, making each turn as if he knew just what he was about. He kept on for half an hour until he came to the rear gate of Mr. Brown's house, where he stopped. Sam went into the yard and saw a man going toward a small granite tomb where the Brown family buried their dead. By the moonlight Sam could see that it was the banker, who was walking in his sleep, for his eyes were wide open, but they were fixed and staring.

Drawing a key from his pocket and opening the heavy iron door of the tomb, he walked in and closed it after him. The detective crept up and cautiously pulled the door open about an inch, which gave him a good view of the inside of the tomb. The banker was just drawing a coffin forward from its niche. Inside was a package done up in brown paper, in which the three million dollars were. The detective was so interested that he pushed the door a little farther open to get a better view. In pushing the door it caused it to screach loudly, awaking the banker. He was very much surprised at finding his money before him and Sam West at the door, looking coolly on.

After explaining, Sam and the banker went into the house, and the next morning the money was taken to the bank where Sam received a liberal reward for saving the banking firm of Brown & Cope.

The Murdered Millionaire.

(By Homer Strong, Middletown, Ind.)

The famous detective, Wilks Morland, was sitting in his hotel room in Horland Square, Chicago, when a messenger boy came in with a letter. Opening it, Wilks read as follows:

"December 15, 1856.

"MR. MORLAND: Mysterious murder and robbery here. Come immediately if possible.

"J. M. SAUNDERS, Chief of Police."

"Well, these are busy times. Just finished a case last week with Irish Dick, and here is another one, but I think I will investigate."

The evening train next day carried the noted detective to the small town of D——, where he visited J. M. Saunders. He found the officer pacing the floor in a much excited manner and murmuring to himself:

"Very mysterious case, chief?" asked Morland, interrupting his train of thought.

The chief turned sharply around and on seeing the detective, exclaimed:

"Oh, you came, did you? I was afraid you would not. Now if you will only take the case we will solve this mystery and find the murderer. It is indeed a very mysterious case."

After a few more questions our hero decided to take the case, and said he was ready to commence business immediately.

"Good for you, good for you!" cried the chief, slapping Morland on the shoulder. Then the chief accompanied the detective to the scene of the crime. When they reached their destination they went to the millionaire's room, where everything had been left exactly as it had been found.

Morland examined the room carefully, and when they were ready to depart the chief said:

"Find anything to offer a clew, Morland?"

The detective answered in the negative, but between his fingers he held a serpent ring with the initials, "M. C. D." on the inside.

This offered Wilks a great clew, for it told him no less a thing than who the murderer was. A short time before Morland had sent Andrew Wallis to Sing Sing for life, and he recognized the ring as one belonging to the convict, who had afterward escaped by a very daring plan, and on close examination he discovered that the ring contained powerful knockout drops.

On leaving the house he saw a hansom coming up the street, and hailing the vehicle clambered upon the box with the driver and started on.

"What passengers did you have Saturday night, mister?"

"What business is that of yours?" retorted the red-nosed driver.

"My man, you had better be careful how you speak to an officer of the law."

"Oh, an officer of the law, are you? That puts a different face on the matter, but," said he, hesitating, "I promised not to tell, and was given five dollars to keep my mouth shut."

"Well, I will give you seven to tell, providing you carried the right parties, and it will be best for you to tell."

The driver rubbed his chin thoughtfuly for a few moments, and suddenly asked:

"And what if I don't tell you?"

"I will take you off to the lock-up," replied Morland, quickly.

"Well, I s'pose I had better tell," he said, "so here goes. A tall man hailed me Saturday evening and ordered me to drive to the old sugar camp out north of town, and said he, 'Say nothing of this and this shall be yours,' and he placed a five-dollar bill in my hand. Of course I promised to keep my mouth shut, and you can bet your life I kept the bill and——"

"Take me to that place just as quick as you can get me there," said the detective, and away dashed the hansom toward the old sugar camp, which was soon to be the scene of quite a sensation.

They approached cautiously as they neared the camp, and Wilks ordered the driver to drive on and in fifteen minutes to be back at the old house and ready for business.

"Bet your life you can depend on me," and with that he went on.

The detective approached stealthily to the cabin, and

peeping through the keyhole, saw three men sitting at a table talking.

"That was a pretty good haul—$500,000," said one.

"But you should not have taken his life," said a second.

"I gave him more than I should have, but that does not make any difference. What I hate is that I lost my ring. We will be out of here to-morrow with the money, and then who can catch us? Ah, we are smart ones, pards!"

The detective suddenly threw open the door by means of a skeleton key, and cried:

"Hands up, gentlemen! You are my prisoners. Arrested for the murder and robbery of the millionaire of D—— last Saturday night."

They all sprang to their feet, but at the sleuth's stern command to be seated, and at the sight of two glittering barrels of Morland's revolver, they sat down again.

Just then the driver appeared on the scene, and while Wilks covered them with his revolvers, the driver put the bracelets on and all three were taken prisoners.

The money was found in a chest in the little hut and was given to its rightful owners. Wallis was hanged and his two partners were sent to Sing Sing, where they are still serving time.

Wilks Morland was handsomely rewarded for his grand work in D——.

The Diamond Smuggler.

(By William F. Pedue, Summitville, Ind.)

Among Detective Ned Stone's private mail he found the following:

"NED STONE:

"A clever diamond smuggler is at work here, but, when searched, no diamonds could be found. Come at once. ROBERT DICK, Custom House Officer.

"Charleston, S. C."

The following day found Ned in Charleston. He paid the custom house officer a visit at once.

"How long has this smuggler been at work?" he asked.

"About ten months."

"Name?"

"Slick Sam."

"Just got out of Sing Sing ten months ago," said Ned, glibly, for he had all criminals at his finger's end.

"Is he in Charleston at present?" was his next question.

"Just left for England for another batch of diamonds. We are expecting him any day."

The following day the steamer *Baltic* arrived. Among the passengers was Jim Ringo, alias Slick Sam. He was carefully searched, but no diamonds were found. Ned disguised as a custom house officer, conducted the search. He was puzzled.

"Gentlemen, Mr. Ringo, is no diamond smuggler," said Ned, in order to throw Slick Sam off his guard.

"Thank you," said Sam. "Have a cigar," tending each of the officers a cigar, and lighting one himself at the same time.

Ned, this time disguised as a traveling man, followed Slick Sam to a hotel. He heard him engage Room 13 of the clerk. The clerk and Ned were familiar friends, and after explaining his business, he asked if Rooms 12 or 14 were occupied.

"Yes; 12 by a lady and 14 by a gentleman."

"I'll fix that all right," said Ned, taking the elevator for the second story.

He knocked at Room 14. He explained that he was a detective and told of the case.

"You may use my room as long as you wish," said the gentleman. "I'll go uptown."

"No," said Ned, "remain."

Ned noiselessly placed a chair close to the door between the two rooms. Then he stood on the chair and peered through the transom.

What he saw was this: The man removed the cigar case, from which he had tendered Ned a cigar an hour before, from his pocket. From the case he took a number of cigars, which were hollow. Unwrapping a few leaves of tobacco from each one, Ned saw small wooden tubes.

Slick Sam next unscrewed each tube in the middle and out fell two diamonds from each one—$10,000 worth in all.

Ned quickly arrested his man, and, after ten months' freedom, Slick Sam rejoined his former comrades in Sing Sing.

Another Robbery Case.

(By W. D. Stewart, Wilmerding, Pa.)

On a snowy night two detectives were watching two men as they worked over an unconscious man. The crooks had drugged the man and sandbagged him.

"Has he got much?" one crook exclaimed.

"Yes, he must be president of a bank by the wad of bills he carries.

"Look out, Jim, here come the cops."

The crooks fled, leaving the unconscious man lying there. The two detectives were Nick Carter and Chick, his assistant. The unconscious man was Charles Norwood, president of the Union National Bank. After he became conscious he said that the crooks were Charles Abbots, alias Paul, and Slim Jim. Both these men were wanted by the police for bank robbing.

The man then asked the detectives to try and capture these men. Nick then left Chick at the house, and then upon going out of the house, carefully disguised himself as a tough and went to a cheap dive. He gave the password and passed into the saloon, where he discovered the crooks.

"Nice haul you made, Jim," he exclaimed.

"What haul do you mean?"

"Aw, gwan, ye can't bluff me, 'cause I seen it wit' me own eyes."

"You blow and we'll blow your head off."

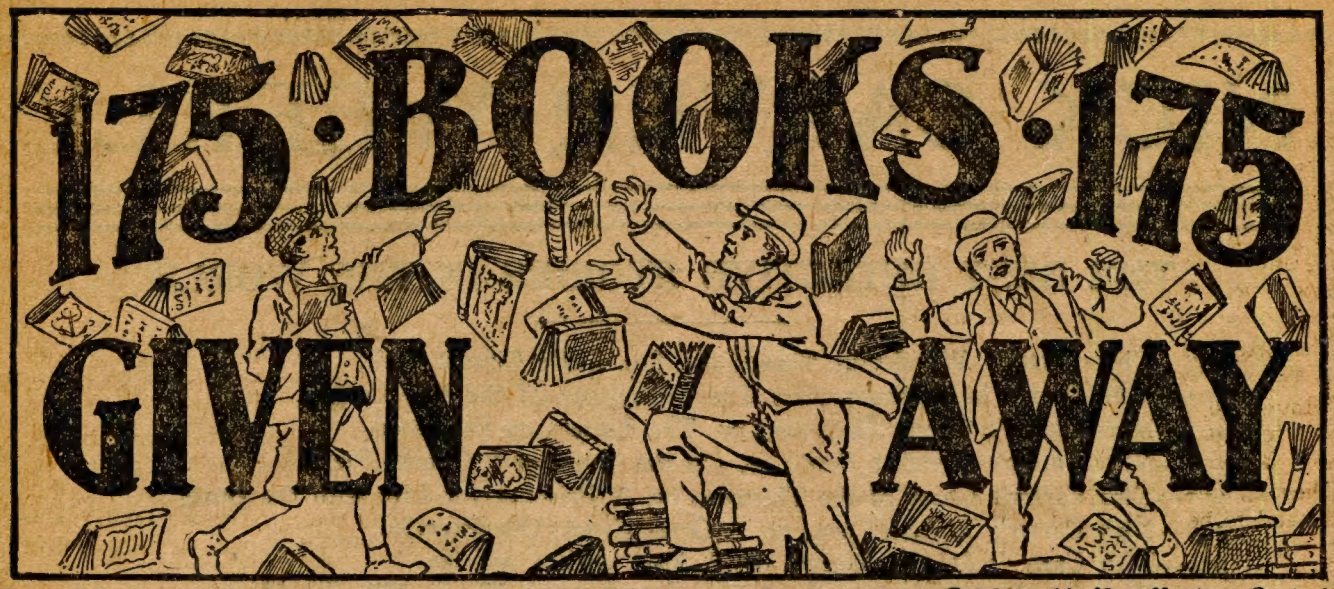
"All right, I won't squeal; but come outside, I want to see you."

"All right," and they went outside.

Upon reaching the outside, Nick drew a pair of revolvers and shoved them under their noses, and exclaimed:

"Boys, your game is up. Come along to the police station."

Seeing resistance was useless they went along, and so ended a great case.



Do You Want a Couple of These Books; Or Three, or Five, or Perhaps TEN?...

Get into this New Mystery Contest, if You Do! Here is a list of the Books, from which you may choose if you win a Prize : : : : : :

FIVE FIRST PRIZES!

The five boys who send in the five best stories will each receive Ten Books from this list. :: ::

TEN SECOND PRIZES!

The ten boys who send in the next best stories will each receive any Four Books they may select in this list :: :: :: :: :: :: :: :: :: ::

FIFTEEN THIRD PRIZES!

The fifteen boys who send in the next best stories will each receive any Three Books they may select in this list. :: :: :: :: :: :: ::

TWENTY OTHER PRIZES!

The twenty boys who send in the next best stories will each receive any Two Books they may select in this list :: :: :: :: :: :: :: :: :: ::

58—Gilbert, the Trapper.....By Captain C. B. Ashley
59—The Rajah's Fortress.....By William Murray Graydon
60—The Mountain Cave.....By George H. Coomer
61—The Erie Train Boy.....By Horatio Alger, Jr.
62—How He Won.....By Brooks McCormick
63—In the Sunk Lands.....By Walter F. Burns
64—The Tour of a Private Car.....By Matthew White, Jr.
65—That Treasure.....By Frank H. Converse
66—A Young Vagabond.....By Z. R. Bennett
67—Tom Brown's School Days.....By Thomas Hughes
68—Smuggler's Cave.....By Annie Ashmore
69—Pirate Island.....By Harry Collingwood
70—The New and Amusing History of Sandford and Merton, By F. C. Burnand
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